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# **SPIRITUAL DRAMA**

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**NATHANIEL WRIGHT STEPHENSON**





**THE  
SPIRITUAL DRAMA  
IN THE  
LIFE OF THACKERAY**

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TO  
LANCELOT MINOR HARRIS  
A SEARCHING THINKER DELICATELY KEEN  
I SUBMIT THIS ARGUMENT





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# **SPIRITUAL DRAMA**



# THE SPIRITUAL DRAMA IN THE LIFE OF THACKERAY

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

**T**HE prose novel of the nineteenth century, like the poetical drama of the Age of Elizabeth, ran a definite course. We can put a finger on the time when it began; we can trace the curve, so to speak, of its development; we are about agreed that it has finished. We are again in the position of Tennyson in his youth when the world stood consciously on a threshold and heard—

The spirit of the years to come  
Yearning to mix himself with life.

At such a moment it is profitable to review the effort of the preceding age. The next few years are likely to see a general settlement of opinion—perhaps temporary, perhaps final—with regard to the great writers of the age of



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George IV and Victoria. At least, we shall come to a conclusion as to what they signify to the century now beginning. We shall decide what part of their endeavour we wish to take up and carry forward, what part we wish to abjure. Every literary epoch becomes, at last, a residue of itself that enters as leaven into the age beyond. It is well, in the present case, to enquire what part of the leaven is good, what bad.

The present essay is a slight contribution to such enquiry. I do not aspire to be Thackeray's biographer. Much is still to be said and contested ere his life can be properly written. What I seek to do is to make plain one view of the nature, the evolution, the significance of his work. By way of prelude there are certain singularities in his career that should be reconsidered. His great fame has been achieved slowly; much of it since his death. In his own time he was never the power that Dickens was. He was keenly sensible of that fact and it is probable that all his life long he looked upon himself as more or less a failure. "Nobody reads it," he said wearily of his own masterpiece. And yet, to-day, nearly half a century after his death, new editions of him appear at short intervals.

His novels have been a battleground. And we should note that what people have fought over is the view of life which those novels express. Dickens has had partisans and detractors but their disagreement has been on questions of art. Dickens' thinking, so far as it goes, is rejected by few. It is the way in which the thought is embodied that offends some people and delights others. With Thackeray, on the other hand, the artistic issue is swallowed up in a moral one. Though people have wrangled over his methods, they have fought to a finish over his principles.

Personally, he was one of the kindest, gentlest, most lovable of men. He was also one of the most unfortunate. No man ever had a more sensitive craving for happiness; few men have been more closely acquainted with sorrow. He was a mixture of splendid virtue with engaging weakness. There was much in him to move us to tears; nothing to arouse our scorn. Allowing for an abnormal sensitiveness with which he was cursed by Nature, he led the life of a hero. Great as are his books, his life to the sympathetic observer is also great.

What strikes us at once is the fact that the life and the work are uniquely bound together,

yet strangely discordant. The more we study the books, the more certain we are that almost all their material, at bottom, is his own experience. But there are things in the life that seem at first blush to have had little effect upon the work. And these are the noblest things the life contained,—constancy, love, unselfishness, such are the keynotes of Thackeray's life. Why is it that we do not think of them as the keynotes of his novels? That question must be answered as we proceed.

A word, here, upon the sequence of the greater novels. Their order with the years that may fairly claim them is as follows: *Barry Lyndon*, 1844; *Vanity Fair*, 1847; *Pendennis*, 1849; *Esmond*, 1852; *The Newcomes*, 1854; *The Virginians*, 1858; *Philip*, 1861; *Denis Duval*, 1864. In the first, an incomparable tour-de-force, we have the worst man Thackeray ever drew. Barry Lyndon is a stupendous image of pure selfishness void of scruple. It is repeated with modifications in each of those colossal egoists, Lord Steyne, Marlborough and Lord Ringwood. Perhaps the first question to be reckoned with in an estimate of Thackeray is: What is the significance of this procession of colossal egoists?



The charge of cynicism is so common in connection with Thackeray that one prepares at once to receive the sneering attack, "See, his men of power are all scoundrels." Until we reach Denis Duval, in which there is a man of power who is not a scoundrel, the sneer may be defended. But the person who does so condemns himself. He fails in two respects. He fails to follow closely Thackeray's thought about those men. He fails to enter fully into Thackeray's mood as an artist.

As to the thought, one is almost tempted to decline to defend it. Not to perceive his burning hatred of such men is to confess oneself obtuse. "But yet," the detractor may reply, "what does that signify? If he hates them why does not he make them unsuccessful? Lyndon and Marlborough, to be sure, are; but Steyne and Ringwood are not." Two things are to be said in reply. First, Thackeray tried to be true to life—we shall enquire later whether he was—and in life evil is often successful. One of the typical features of the nineteenth century, a feature never to be forgotten in examining it, was its consciousness of successful sin. This is especially true of its finest minds. No more significant line was

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penned in that century than Lowell's "Right for ever on the scaffold, wrong for ever on the throne."

Every age has a typical literary motive which underlies all its great books. The typical motive of the time of Thackeray was the conquest of evil over good. Dickens, to be sure, broke boldly through such thinking. But Dickens, like the greater Browning, was not among the writers who are the peculiar expression of his time. Rather, he like Browning seems a great intruder, a reincarnation of some younger, more trustful age, or else the herald of a mightier age to come. We smile at his crudities; we may condemn his methods; but the heart of man responds steadily to his exuberant conviction that in the long run right will win. If we show him a case in which "robber wrong" prevails, he replies, "That is an exception," and pounds on fearlessly with his gospel, "Be not afraid." But this was not, alas! the mood of his time. The typical age of doubt, it dragged its anchors and went adrift. The utter hopelessness of the novels of Thomas Hardy, their conviction that almost nothing on earth goes right, show the dark last hours of the art that was typical of the troubled century.

One other consideration should be pointed out in advance. It is a thoughtless and inattentive reader, who, after finishing *Vanity Fair*, written mainly in 1847, can turn to *The Newcomes* which took form in 1854 and not perceive immediately that between those two books the mood of the author had been transformed. In *Vanity Fair* we are borne down by a sense of what might be termed the predestination in character; the idea that people are what they are; they will be what they will be; nothing can alter their destinies because nothing can change their natures. In *The Newcomes* we are freed from this idea. The relentlessness of the earlier book has given place to the larger faith—

“I only trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill.”

Midway between these two great novels stands the central fact of Thackeray's life as an artist, *Henry Esmond*. It marks the summit of a watershed. The pinnacle of his art, it is also the culmination, the cessation, of his sterner, more hopeless, earlier mood. In it we discern the beginnings of the later mood. Though the major figures are conceived fatalistically, certain minor figures strike the other



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note. Naturally, we look for the explanation of this march of mood. Why, at the time of *Vanity Fair*, was Thackeray hopeless and defiant? Why did he turn the corner in *Esmond*? How did he work out his salvation at the end? These questions also must be answered as we proceed.

To recapitulate: in reviewing the procession of Thackeray's novels we notice a change of attitude on the part of the creator toward His creatures. By contrasting the extremes we are made aware that the earlier point of view was comparatively fatalistic: the later, hopeful. *Barry Lyndon* in Thackeray's first novel moves inevitably toward his doom because his own nature can never by any possibility be reversed. That opening novel is upon the wages of sin. So is the second, *Vanity Fair*. *Pendennis* makes a partial break in the sequence but the true curve is recovered in *Esmond* where the fatalism of character is made appallingly plain. But there, also, begins the new hopefulness that develops through the later books and swings Thackeray round to a different point of view. The biographical significance of *Esmond* demands our closest attention, because, in writing it Thackeray seems to have delivered himself from certain

dreadful ideas and with the completion of it he took a fresh start. When we pass on into *The Newcomes* we find that fatalistic figures are in the minority, the fatalistic note is not the major one. When *Philip* is reached we have at last a really buoyant note. In *Denis Duval* the sense of fate is hardly felt and it is not even suggested that man is not the real victor over circumstance.

In the chapters which follow, though it is imperative to give an outline of Thackeray's career, it is not in the least my intention to plunder those charming prefaces by Mrs. Ritchie, which, I trust, her publishers will ere long bring out in a single work. Neither do I seek to conceal in a different style the recent and valuable though somewhat spiteful life by Mr. Charles Whibley. My aim is to give only so much of the career as is needed to explain the novels and to extract from the novels their true biographical significance.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY LIFE

**W**ILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY was born at Calcutta, July 18, 1811. His father then was, his grandfather had been, a competent civil servant of the East India Company. His great-grandfather was Dr. Thomas Thackeray, head master of Harrow, chaplain to Prince Frederick and an archdeacon. His father's mother was a daughter of Colonel Richmond Webb through whom Thackeray was remotely related to that picturesque soldier whose victory of Wynandael plays so great a part in *Henry Esmond*. Thackeray's mother was Miss Anne Beecher, who was described in her youth as a reigning beauty in the government set at Calcutta.

Richmond Thackeray, the father of the novelist, died in 1816, and in 1817 William Makepeace was sent to England. On the way his ship touched at St. Helena and his nurse took him for a glimpse of the "ogre," who was



supposed to eat three sheep a day and all the little children he could catch. Arriving in England, the child was taken in charge by an aunt and was afterward at school in the same locality which he has immortalised with Miss Pinkerton's Academy. But the significant part of his boyhood seems to attach to that famous old Charterhouse School which all the heroes of his novels have attended. Thackeray entered Charterhouse in 1822 and remained there till 1828. As a schoolboy he is thus described by his school-mate, George Venables:

"My recollection of him, though fresh enough, does not furnish much material for biography. He came to school young—a pretty, gentle, and rather timid boy. I think his experience there was not generally pleasant. Though he had afterwards a scholarlike knowledge of Latin, he did not attain distinction in the school; and I should think that the character of the head-master, Dr. Russell, which was vigorous, unsympathetic, and stern, though not severe, was uncongenial to his own. With the boys who knew him, Thackeray was popular; but he had no skill in games, and, I think, no taste for them. . . . HE WAS ALREADY KNOWN BY HIS FACULTY

FOR MAKING VERSES, chiefly parodies. I only remember one line of one parody on a poem of L. E. L.'s, about 'Violets, dark blue violets'; Thackeray's version was 'Cabbages, bright green cabbages,' and we thought it very witty. He took part in a scheme, which came to nothing, for a school magazine, and he wrote verses for it, of which I only remember that they were good of their kind. When I knew him better, in later years, I thought I could recognise the sensitive nature which he had as a boy. . . . His change of retrospective feeling about his school days was very characteristic. In his earlier books he always spoke of the Charterhouse as the Slaughter House and Smithfield. As he became famous and prosperous his memory softened, and Slaughter House was changed into Grey Friars where Colonel Newcome ended his life."

It was Venables, by the way, when both were boys at Charterhouse, who gave Thackeray the blow that broke his nose. A more significant event was the friendship formed at Charterhouse with John Leech, a friendship which afterward helped Thackeray to a place on the staff of *Punch*.

Thackeray's mother had married in 1818,

Major William Henry Carmichael Smyth, of the Indian service, who is supposed to be the original of Colonel Newcome. In 1821, the Smyths returned to England and in 1825 took a house called Larkbeare, about a mile and a half from Ottery St. Mary in Devonshire. This house and its surroundings played an important part in Thackeray's life. He spent, there, his later vacations from Charterhouse. He lived at Larkbeare from the time he left school in May, 1828, to the time of his entrance into Cambridge, as a student of Trinity, February, 1829. If we take down *Pendennis* and note the likeness between the names of Clavering St. Mary and Ottery St. Mary, we have a clew to the sources of that great book. Clavering St. Mary and Ottery St. Mary are the same. The real town is described in Thackeray's account of the imaginary one—that little old town of Clavering St. Mary with its peaked roofs rising up amongst trees, a fair background of sunshiny hills, an old church with great grey towers, of which the sun illuminates the delicate carving, deepening the shadows of the great buttresses, and gilding the glittering windows and flaming vane.

The points of coincidence in the careers of



Thackeray and Arthur Pendennis are numerous. Both were Charterhouse boys; both lived in the same part of Devonshire; both went to Cambridge and idled there; both read law and gave it up; each drifted into literature by way of a newspaper; each became at last a successful novelist. A frivolous observer might insist on the fact that each made his first appearance in print as the author of verses in a Devonshire county paper. But the similarity does not extend to subject matter. Pen's first appearance was amatory and addressed to Miss Fotheringay when impersonating Imogene. Thackeray's first appearance was in burlesque.

It would seem that Larkbeare, in which we cannot fail to identify the Fair Oaks of *Pendennis*, was to Thackeray a grateful relief, not to say a haven of refuge, after Charterhouse School. Too many boys of genius have found their schooldays irksome, and Thackeray was of the number. In a letter which has been often quoted he wrote to his mother: "I really think, I am becoming terribly industrious, though I can't get Dr. Russell to think so. It is hard when you endeavour to work hard to find your attempts nipped in the bud—There are but 370 in the school. I wish there

were but 369." However he escaped from Charterhouse—so doubtless the change appeared to him at the time—and there followed a period which reminds one of that interim in the life of Pendennis between his leaving school and his entrance into the university. Thackeray pursued his studies—"read," as people used to say—with his stepfather for nearly a year. I have mentioned that he entered Cambridge in February, 1829. He was not yet eighteen.

At the University, he did not distinguish himself any more than at school. One of his college friends, a future Master of Trinity, Dr. Thompson, has declared that his companions "did not see in him even the germ of those literary powers which, under the stern influence of necessity, he afterwards developed." In his May examination he was put in the fourth class. "It was a class," says Dr. Thompson, "where clever, 'non-reading men' were put as in a limbo. But though careless of University distinction he had a vivid appreciation of English poetry, and chanted the praises of the old English novelists, especially his model, Fielding. He had always a flow of humour and pleasantry and was made much of by his friends. At supper-parties, though

not talkative—rather observant—he enjoyed the humours of the hour, and sang one or two old songs with great applause. ‘Old King Cole,’ I well remember to have heard from him at the supper I gave to celebrate my election as scholar. It made me laugh excessively, not from the novelty of the song but the humour with which it was given.”

A diary of Thackeray’s which he sent, in portions, to his mother has been preserved and in part published. It opens as follows: “I am now about to begin my first journal, my dearest mother, which I hope will be always sent with the regularity which it is my full purpose to give to it. After father left me, I went in rather low spirits to S—— of Corpus, and with him strayed about among the groves, or rather fields, which skirt the colleges of Kings, Trinity, etc.”

This entry is dated Saturday, 28 February, 1829. The journal to his mother gives us many pleasant glimpses into the life of a “clever non-reading man” eighty years ago. Also it is a monument to an affection which is among the beautiful things in Thackeray’s life. For present purposes, however, a single passage is all that demands quotation:

“A poem of mine hath appeared in a weekly

periodical here published and called *The Snob*. I will bring it home with me. In a month's time I trust to be at home. My private tutor, for a wonder, was not up when I went to him at six this morning. I cut lecture this morning and breakfasted with two Charterhouse masters, Penny and Dickens—who are Charterhouse masters all over. Young had a pleasant wine party at which for a short time I attended. 'Timbuctoo' received much laud. I could not help finding out that I was very fond of this same praise. The men knew not the author but praised the poem; how eagerly I sucked it in. 'All is vanity!'

The "Timbuctoo" mentioned in this entry was not Tennyson's poem which won the Chancellor's prize in 1829, but a burlesque on the same subject written by Thackeray. *The Snob* in which it appeared was a little periodical which stated on its title page that it was *not* conducted by members of the University. This curious association of those two great men of genius reminds us that Thackeray and Tennyson became friends at Cambridge.

Part of the long vacation of 1829 Thackeray spent at Paris studying French and German. He came up for his degree in 1830, and



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was not successful. That was the end of his University career.

The story of Thackeray's youth seems to have been parted by him among three of his characters—Pen, Clive and Philip. To Pen, he gave Devonshire, Cambridge and the Temple; to Philip, among other things, the life of the English student in Paris; to Clive the English lad in Germany. Those delightful chapters of *The Newcomes* which transport them all to the Rhineland take a new significance as we follow Thackeray's own wanderings after leaving Cambridge. He set out in the summer of 1830 and by the end of July was at Coblenz, having stayed a month at Godesberg. But Weimar was the scene of most of his German sojourn. It is Weimar that comes to life again in the Pumpernickel of *Vanity Fair*.

Mr. Herman Merivale who has said many suggestive things about Thackeray has something on this visit to Weimar which may, or may not, be conclusive but which sets us thinking. "Thackeray was still meditating a profession," writes Mr. Merivale, . . . "But I suspect that it was that life at Weimar that fixed the bent before he knew it—What else could life at Weimar do? The very name is

suggestive of a Court of Letters which has no parallel in story; and that a young man like Thackeray, fervent of heart, eager of years, and imaginative of brain, should come out of the living presence of Goethe, and scarce less living memory of Schiller, unspoiled for the learned professions, and anything other than an author foredoomed," was, thinks Mr. Merivale, impossible.

Well, perhaps. Thackeray was a talented, versatile, idle, young man of genius. He lived at Weimar where he saw Goethe; and he admired Schiller who was recently dead. He was keenly impressionable. He was uncertain what art to take up—if, indeed, he should take up any. It is quite possible that Weimar may have influenced him more deeply than he was aware. Certainly, it greatly pleased him. He wrote of it in after years that he had "never seen a society more simple, charitable, courteous, gentlemanlike, than that of the dear little Saxon city where the good Schiller and the great Goethe lived and lie buried."

Thackeray returned to England in 1831 and made a choice of profession which turned out to be inconclusive. He chose Law and entered the Middle Temple. It is doubtful

whether his application to Law was any more assiduous than that of Mr. Arthur Pendennis or Mr. Philip Firmin. But one thing that he drew from his life in *The Temple* was a store of scenery which was laid away in his capacious memory and afterward reproduced in wonderful combinations. "Thackeray had his originals in brick and mortar as well as in flesh and blood," says Mr. Merivale, and by way of confirmation tells this: "When I was myself living on a third floor in Garden Court—number three it was—I remember how the great man honoured me by bringing one of his gracious favourites, Lady Colville, to tea in the little rooms, and his pleasure in finding in them the genuine originals of Chevalier Strong's chambers in Shepherd's Inn, with the water pipe and gutter which served him as a retreat from his creditors, watchful behind the sported oak, into Costigan and Bows' nest next door."

Law and politics keep so close together that Thackeray's next departure is not surprising. In 1832, the year of the Reform Bill, when he should have been hard at work, we find him away in Cornwall electioneering. He has told the tale in a letter to his mother:

"June 25, 1832, Polwellan, West Looe,

Cornwall. Are you surprised, dear Mother, at the direction? Certainly not more prepared for it than I was myself, but you must know that on Tuesday in last week I went to breakfast with Charles Buller, and he received a letter from his constituents at Liskeard requesting him immediately to come down; he was too ill, but instead deputed Arthur Buller and myself—so off we set, that same night by the mail, arrived at Plymouth the next day, and at Liskeard the day after, where we wrote addresses, canvassed farmers and dined with attorneys. Then we came on to Mr. Buller's and here I have been very happy since last Friday. On Wednesday last I was riding for twelve hours canvassing—rather a feat for me, and considering I have not been on horseback for eight months, my stiffness yesterday was by no means surprising; but it is seven o'clock of a fine summer's morning, so I have no fatigue to complain of. I have been lying awake this morning meditating on the wise and proper manner I shall employ my fortune in when I come of age, which, if I live so long, will take place in three weeks. First, I do not intend to quit my little chambers in the Temple, then I will take a regular monthly income which I will never exceed. . . . God bless you, dear



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Mother; write directly and give your orders. . . . Charles Buller comes down at the end of next week—if you want me sooner I will come, if not I should like to wait for the reform rejoicings which are to take place at his arrival, particularly as I have had a great share in the canvassing.”

How inevitably one thinks of the great election scenes in *The Newcomes* and their understudy in *Philip!*

Thackeray's good resolutions about his property went the way of so many others. His fortune and what became of it has been a subject of speculation, but the story seems now to be tolerably plain. He came into some 20,000 pounds in 1832. Eighteen months afterward he wrote to his mother that he should thank heaven for making him a poor man as now he would have to work harder and earn his bread. Three causes of his ruin were a newspaper, a bank and gambling.

The latter was once assigned as the main cause of his losses, and though the details are not public property, the following incident was first published by permission of his family: Along with Sir Theodore Martin he was walking, one afternoon, through the play rooms at Spa and stopped at the Rouge et Noir table to

look on. While standing there, Thackeray touched his companion on the elbow and asked him to observe "a tall man, in a seedy brown frock coat, at the other end of the table. The man's appearance was that of a broken down gentleman who had still the remains of a certain distinction of manner." So, Sir Theodore Martin described him, adding that as they were walking away, Thackeray said, "That was the original of my Deuceace; I have not seen him since the day he drove me down in his cabriolet to my brokers in the City and I sold out my patrimony and handed it over to him." Thackeray also said that this man and another, knowing that he was newly come into money, induced him to play *écarté* with them; they let him win at first but soon turned on him and did not let him off until they had won fifteen hundred pounds. This story was told by Thackeray without any acrimony and was closed with this characteristic comment: "Poor devil! my money doesn't seem to have thriven with him."

"You are quite safe," wrote Martin later to Herman Merivale, "in saying that Deuceace was drawn from the life. I am quite sure of what I told you. Well do I remember, as we walked out into the soft sweet air of the sum-

mer evening, how a sort of sadness seemed to settle upon Thackeray, as if the recollection of what he had told me had been too much for him; and he said, although it was quite early, 'I think I'll go home to my hotel,' which he did. He told me other things in his life of a very striking kind, but I know they were meant for myself alone. Poor fellow, he had some terribly bitter experiences."

The second cause of his loss of a fortune was an Indian bank, the failure of which is supposed to be the origin of that other failure which overwhelmed Colonel Newcome. It should be remembered that Major Smyth is the reputed original of Colonel Newcome. Both were lovable, simple-hearted, unpractical men with a weakness for speculation. More than once Major Smyth got his stepson into difficulties. If he was Thackeray's early adviser in business, Thackeray could hardly have had a worse one.

His third venture was also a failure. In January, 1833, appeared the first number of the *National Standard*—a Journal of Literature, Science, Music, Theatricals and the Fine Arts. By the end of the previous year, Thackeray had made up his mind to abandon Law and was looking about for an opening of an

artistic sort. He thought he saw it in this journal, which he bought and undertook to edit. If there is any moment in his career that appeals especially to the cheerful imagination it is his assumption of control over *The Standard*, upon which he intended to stamp his personality and by which he would make a great name and astonish the world. At that time he was not quite twenty-two; he had just discarded a profession; he was brilliant, ardent, inexperienced, and believing. He lived to put the story of his first great defeat into his novel of *Lovel the Widower*.

"They are welcome," says the bachelor, "to make merry at my charges in respect of a certain bargain which I made on coming to London, and in which, had I been Moses Primrose purchasing green spectacles, I could scarcely have been more taken in. My Jenkinson was an old college acquaintance, whom I was idiot enough to imagine a respectable man. The fellow had a very smooth tongue and sleek and sanctified exterior. He was rather a popular preacher, and used to cry a good deal in the pulpit. He and a queer wine merchant and bill discounter, Sherrick by name, had somehow got possession of that neat little literary paper, *The Museum*, which perhaps you



remember, and this eligible literary property my friend Honeyman, with his wheedling tongue, induced me to purchase."

In June, 1833, Thackeray went to Paris as correspondent for *The Standard* and remained in Paris through the summer. When he came back in November, *The Standard* was in a bad way. In February, 1834, the paper reached its last number.

Defeated in his first great bout with Life, with his money gone, Thackeray determined to try his luck in a different field and set out on a serious attempt to be a painter. That same year, 1834, he began the attempt at Paris. For two years, or so, he struggled along trying hard to draw and also, apparently, to write. As everyone knows he never got far in his drawing, though some draughtsmen have thought he had the making of a fine hand. He certainly had a delightful but unreliable trick of caricature which he turned later to good account. In 1836, he applied to Dickens for permission to illustrate *Pickwick*, but his services were not accepted. That year appeared his first publication, "Flore et Zephyr," a series of eight satirical drawings published at London and Paris.

While Thackeray had been struggling along

in Paris, his stepfather had indulged his love of speculation and had organised a new Liberal paper called *The Constitutional*. It was to begin on the fifteenth of September, 1836. In July, Thackeray was appointed Paris correspondent at eight guineas a week.

And now, with a new lease of hope, this undaunted dreamer flung the golden dice that fortune trusts so recklessly in the hands of youth. The lady's name was Isabella Shawe. She was Irish, the daughter of a Colonel Matthew Shawe who had been military secretary to the Marquis of Wellesley. She was a minor and was married to Thackeray, "with consent of her mother," as the record shows, at the British Embassy in Paris, August 20, 1836.

Thackeray and his girl bride were home from their honeymoon in time for him to begin work as correspondent for *The Constitutional* in September. The paper failed in July, 1837, leaving a debt which embarrassed Major Smyth for several years. Now came a desperate tug for the Thackerays. At one time, he was writing in Paris on ten francs a day. Before the end of 1837 he was living at 13 Great Coram Street, London, and doing all sorts of hack work. It was then that he wrote

for *The Times* a review of "The French Revolution," and was thus described by Carlyle:

"The critic is one Thackeray, a half monstrous Cornish giant, kind of painter Cambridge man and Paris newspaper correspondent, who is now writing for his life in London."

Writing for his life was indeed what Thackeray was doing. All through 1838 he wrote much for *The Times*, for the *Morning Chronicle*, for the *New Monthly Magazine*, for *Frazer's*, for *Ainsworth's*, for the *Westminster Review*. He had made the acquaintance of Cruikshank and wrote for his *Omnibus* and the *Comic Almanac*. He used both verse and prose and still tried to turn a penny by drawing. A curious account of him, at this time, is a letter of introduction sent by C. B. Cole to Cobden with one of Thackeray's sketches. Cole thought that the young man might be given work in the Anti-Corn Law campaign. He wrote:

"The artist is a genius both with his pen and his pencil. His vocation is literary. He is full of humour and feeling. Hitherto he has not had occasion to think much on the subject of Corn Laws, and therefore wants the stuff to work upon. He would like to combine both writing and drawing when sufficiently primed,

and then he would write and illustrate ballads, or tales, or anything. I think you would find him a most useful auxiliary."

But Thackeray's main bent had by now become apparent. Though he was practising three arts, drawing, verse and prose, it was plain that only one was his own. The drawing and the verse were mere graceful embroideries and the real fabric was the prose.

But it is also quite plain that in those days Thackeray lacked conviction as to what he was fitted to write about. He was not one of your lucky writers who are gifted with what may be called the instinct of subject matter, who know from the start just what they should deal with. However, certain things were in the air, just then—for example, burlesque. The influence of Dickens, who was already in the full flush of his enormous popularity, was felt by Thackeray more deeply than his worshippers like to admit and when, in 1838, he at last did something noteworthy, the influence of Dickens had a hand in that success. It was the now famous *Fashionable Fax and Polite Annygoats*, by Charles Yellowplush, which appeared in *Frazer's Magazine*. All of us know Yellowplush, the footman, Thackeray's puppet satirist, by means of whom he struck



some hard blows, and whose "orthography is inaccurate." Snobbery is the main butt of the shooting but the fire ranges pretty widely to right and left. It was through Yellowplush that Thackeray dealt his merciless blow to Bulwer. He followed up his attack on Bulwer by that demi-novel, so to speak, *Catherine*, which is half a real story, half a travesty on Eugene Aram. *Catherine*, written in the first person, purports to be the work of Ikey Solomon. "Be it granted," says Thackeray in the epilogue, "Solomon is dull; but don't attack his morality. He humbly submits that, in his poem, no man shall mistake virtue for vice, no man shall allow a single sentiment of pity or admiration to enter his bosom for any character in the poem, it being from beginning to end a scene of unmixed rascality, performed by persons who never deviate into good feeling."

Thus early do we see that bent for castigation, that willingness to make assault upon evil, which was afterward to be so large a part of Thackeray's arsenal. As yet, however, he was too obscure to be a formidable enemy. Years were still to pass before he ceased to be a mere hack who barely managed to make both ends meet.

Thackeray was to be called upon, however, to stand a test far more searching than adversity. Hitherto he had been sustained by the idyllic happiness of his marriage. He was devoted to his wife and children—there were three children, of whom two survived infancy and were their father's consolation in later years—and this period of his hardest pecuniary struggle was undoubtedly his happiest time. Speaking of his wife, long afterward, he said to one of his cousins, "I was as happy as the day was long with her."

We come, now, to the year 1840, and the catastrophe which counts for so much in explaining Thackeray. In the spring of that year, he made a brief trip to Belgium. When he went away his wife appeared to be well; when he returned she was suffering from languor and depression. Her malady grew steadily more distressing. Thackeray took her abroad to Paris, and then to Germany, and at one time wrote home that she was all but cured. But he was deceiving himself. She ceased presently to recognise people and before long it was necessary to place her in the constant care of an attendant. Her mind had become a blank.

The effects of this blow upon Thackeray

cannot be overestimated. His bereavement touched every fibre both of his heart and his brain. In him tenderness was very nearly, if not quite, the major part and there is abundant evidence that the cloud of this great grief never lifted. An old Irish groom in the stables of Anthony Trollope once said to Thackeray, "I hear you have written a book upon Ireland, and are always making fun of the Irish; you don't like us." "God help me!" said Thackeray, turning away his head as his eyes filled with tears, "all that I have loved best in the world is Irish." He wrote to a young man who was struggling for fortune in order to marry, "If I can see my way to help you, I will. Though my marriage was a wreck, as you know, I would do it over again, for behold Love is the crown and completion of all earthly good."

Again, years after, writing of his two children whom he had taken for a trip up the Rhine, he says, "I sat with the children and talked with them about their mother last night. It is my pleasure to tell them how humble minded their mother was." In still another letter he has touched upon this sad subject in his own inimitable way:

"As I am waiting to see Mrs. Buller, I find

an old *Review* with an advertisement in it, containing a great part of an article I wrote about Fielding, in 1840 in the *Times*. . . . My wife was just sickening at that moment: I wrote it at Margate, where I had taken her, and used to walk out three miles to a little bowling green, and write there in an arbour—coming home and wondering what was the melancholy oppressing the poor little woman. The *Times* gave me five guineas for the article. I recollect I thought it rather shabby pay, and twelve days after it appeared in the paper my poor little wife's malady showed itself. . . . God help us what a deal of cares, and pleasures, and struggles and happiness I have had since that day in the little sunshiny arbour, where, with scarcely any money in my pocket and two little children (Minnie was a baby two months' old), I was writing this notice about Fielding. Grief, Love, Fame, if you like: I have had no little of all since then. (I don't mean to take the Fame for more than it's worth, or brag about it with any peculiar elation)."

Thus the first main division of Thackeray's life came to an end. His children were sent to their grandparents in Paris. His wife was placed in the care of her attendant.



Thackeray himself took lodgings and buried himself in work. Little over thirty, but shut up within himself in the heart's solitude; broadly and deeply unfortunate; having failed in all his ventures; having parted with happiness; he fell into that tone of brave sadness which sounds so finely through most of his books. For a man who felt as deeply as Thackeray did, it was not possible to throw off his burden. The most he could do was to conceal it. He did so. He hid his tears behind that whimsical, pitying smile which is at once so brave and so pathetic. Sometimes it happens that the most sensitive people are the bravest in trouble—sometimes, not always—and Thackeray is a case in point. From this time forward there is in all his writings a piercing sense of the sadness, the weariness, the unhappiness of the world. But he does not surrender to it. He denounces the thought of surrender in others. He has for himself the strong man's solace of work. Through all his darkness he keeps faith that somehow the "Awful Father" will at last untangle this sad strange web of our afflictions. And always to the outward world he maintains an unbroken front. But people who hold the clue discern the tears always behind the smile.

"In attempting to understand his character," wrote his friend Trollope, "it is necessary for you to bear within your own mind, the idea that he was always encountering melancholy with buffoonery and meanness with satire."

## CHAPTER III

### THE APPRENTICE HAND

“**T**HE two key-secrets of Thackeray’s great life, as I take it,” says his most sympathetic biographer, Herman Merivale, “were these—Disappointment and Religion. The first was his poison; the second was his antidote. And the antidote won. No wonder that he was disappointed. First, a man of fortune, then a ruined and struggling artist, then a journalist, recognised to the full as such even by the brothers of his craft, but, like them, very little beyond it, then at last the novelist and the famous man, he was thirty-six before the first number of *Vanity Fair* was published. Till then he was not really known . . . he saw the other of the great twin brethren, one half year his junior, in the full flood of fame at twenty-four years old. Dickens was born in February, 1812. In 1841 he was banqueted at Edinburgh as no man was before, with ‘Christopher North’ in the chair, before Thackeray knew ‘what he was going to

be,' but of the versatility of mind which is as great a danger as a charm. Dickens knew his own line from the first."

There is more to be said, however, than is set out in these sentences. Sheer versatility, no doubt, stood in Thackeray's way at the start, and he, like all men of varied endowment, spent a long time casting about among his talents, seeking to determine where lay his real strength. Dickens with less natural endowment learned sooner how to use what he had. But when this has been allowed for, the difference between their careers is not yet explained. For an adequate explanation we must observe the difference in their natures.

The firmness, not to say hardness, of Dickens contrasts at every point with the gentleness, the sensitiveness, of Thackeray. The fact that "Dickens knew his line from the first" is indicative of a natural decision which seems to have been lacking in Thackeray. The story of his youth shows how vividly he responded to circumstances, how easily he passed from one purpose to another, how enthusiastically he followed each new venture. In a word, there was a side to Thackeray which most people would call weak, and for this side of him he paid a sad price. And yet, it was because of



this side, when at last it had been refined and tempered by suffering, that Thackeray was able to cast up the sum of human life with truer justice and wider range of vision than any other English novelist and also with a tenderness of sympathy not equalled except by Miss Austen.

The sentences from Mr. Merivale are slightly misleading because they do not suggest that Thackeray's religion had more to do than merely to overcome his disappointments, that its greatest task was to overcome his natural weakness. Mr. Merivale's silence upon this point is significant. Thackeray was a type of man to whom most people have great difficulty in being squarely just. If he appeal to one at all he appeals so deeply that the temptation to hold a brief for him is great. If, on the other hand, one has that resolute self-confidence which the parable of the mote and the beam does not penetrate, the temptation to be clever at his expense is hardly to be resisted. Therein lies the fault of the most recent life of him, the otherwise valuable memoir by Mr. Whibley. Excellent as the book is in many respects the general effect of it is false. For Mr. Whibley ignores entirely the inward drama of Thackeray's great life. If one were

to describe him with as little charity as he shows to Thackeray, one would say that he lacks spiritual vision. He is blind to that long, slow but at length victorious warfare of Thackeray's religion against his weakness.

Only by keeping that drama in mind can we see him as he really was, neither a Prometheus as he appears to Mr. Merivale, nor a sentimentalist as he appears to Mr. Whibley, but a sensitive, unhappy man, who, in his early life, showed something of the Prometheus: who took on for a season not a little of the sentimentalist; but who became at last bravely and simply a Christian.

The first act of Thackeray's inward drama closed with the ruin of his home in 1840. This occurred in the midst of his literary apprenticeship which it tended naturally to darken and retard. His religion, at that time, though it saved him from surrender to despair, was not yet strong enough to keep his grief within bounds. The result is Thackeray's constant tendency in all his earlier books to look upon the dark side. Though he knows there are others who are happy, though he does not lose faith in the life to come where somehow all things will be adjusted, yet, for this present, beneath the weight of his own affliction,

he gives way to the impulse to brood darkly upon the wretchedness of the world. Because he does so, it is easy for the serene student to take the tone of superiority, to brand Thackeray as a "sentimentalist." There is no denying that it is a great sin to make a luxury of unhappiness, to convert one's heart into a forcing house for woe, and from the fruit of despair suck a bitter stimulant. The man who does so is indeed a sentimentalist, and we must admit that Thackeray between thirty and forty erred somewhat in that direction. And yet, whoso makes a sneer out of this fact, convicts himself of superficiality, demonstrates his blindness to the inner drama that was going on in this noble spirit. If Thackeray's star went down for a time into darkness, it rose again more glorious by far than before it set. As to the defeat of his resolution in these early years, and the glib verdict that has been passed upon him, we cannot do better than remember Romeo's line, "He jests at scars who never felt a wound."

In 1841, the year Dickens was banqueted at Edinburgh, "as no man was before," Thackeray was at Paris writing *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, of which Edward Fitzgerald, in a letter dated February 18, 1841,

writes thus: "Have you read Thackeray's little book, *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*? If not, pray do, and buy it and ask others to buy it: as each copy sold puts 7½ d in T's pocket: which is not very heavy just now, I take it."

This "little book" which purported to be the work of Michael Angelo Titmarsh is an admirable specimen of Thackeray's hack writing. The public however "refused to read it." After Thackeray's death, as Mrs. Ritchie tells us, the manuscript was contributed to the *Cornhill Magazine* with this note from the gentleman who had been her father's agent in publishing it: "I had the pleasure of editing the tiny volume for Mr. Titmarsh and saw it through the press, and after awhile, on the dismal tidings that the little effort made no impression on the public, Mr. Titmarsh wrote to me from Paris a pretty little note commencing, 'So your poor Titmarsh has made another fiasco. How are we to take this great stupid public by the ears? Never mind, I think I have something that will surprise them yet!'" The "something" seems to have been the first notes of *Vanity Fair*, though six years were to pass before they came to anything.

In spite of the "stupid public" of that day and its lack of taste, the *Second Funeral* is a



charming little book. Though it is hardly more than a newspaper report, you may go a long way before you find elsewhere such art with such faithfulness to fact and such simplicity. Those two or three pages in which Mr. Titmarsh describes the English family that lodges in the same house with him are above praise. How beautiful they are, how perfectly simple, without the least disguise of rhetoric, but also how full of Thackeray's mood, how wistful! He dwells upon the picture of that happy family with a loving insistence that betrays itself. People who are happy themselves do not dwell thus fondly on the spectacle of a contented family going out for a holiday. It is the lonely men and women who pause on the street to watch such parties, who go home and put into beautiful words that loveliest thing in life, the simple, ordinary happiness of normal people. Knowing when this little book was written, knowing how lonely Thackeray was, we can read a great deal between the lines of his description of—

“The grandfather, who is as proud of his wife as he was thirty years ago when he married, and pays her compliments still twice or thrice a day, and when he leads her into a

room, looks round at the persons assembled and says in his heart, 'Here, gentlemen, here is my wife: show me such another woman in England!'—this gentleman had hired a room on the Champs Élysées, for he would not have his wife catch cold by exposing her to the balconies in the open air."

We need not be told how Thackeray turned away from that pretty picture and saw the face of his own love with the mind gone from it, nor how wearily he went to his work.

Of another book of the same period, *The Great Hogarty Diamond*, which was also a failure, Thackeray has said, "It was written at a time when the author was suffering the severest personal grief and calamity—" "at a time," he writes again, "when my heart was very soft and humble": namely, 1841. The same year he published also *Comic Tales* which were not much. In 1842 he visited Ireland, met Lever and collected material for the *Irish Sketch Book* which came out the year after. *Punch*, meanwhile, had come into existence with Leech as a contributor. Leech succeeded in getting on the staff his old school-mate and in June, 1842, Thackeray contributed *The Legend of Jawbrahim Heraudee*. The same year *Miss Tickletoby's Lectures on Eng-*

*glish History* came out in *Punch*. Thackeray not only wrote for *Punch* but also made drawings. He contributed in all 380 sketches. One of them has a curious notoriety. No one has ever been able to determine what it is about. A rival paper once offered a prize for a solution of the riddle. In 1843, Thackeray was included in the Christmas dinner of "Mr. Punch's Cabinet."

During the five years following his great catastrophe Thackeray lived in chambers—first at 27 Jermyn Street, then at 88 St. James Street—while his children remained with their grandparents. His poverty shut him out of the more conspicuous society of the day and such pleasure as he had was derived from observing the reckless humours of Bohemia and from the life of his clubs. As early as 1833, when he was a prosperous youth of twenty-two, he had joined the Garrick Club. In March, 1840, he had been elected to the Reform Club. "He was a frequenter," says his son-in-law, Sir Leslie Stephen, "of 'Evans' described in many of his works, and belonged at this and later periods to various sociable clubs of the old-fashioned style, such as the Shakespeare, the Fielding (of which he was a founder) and 'Our Club.' There in the evenings he met

literary comrades and gradually became known as an eminent member of the fraternity. Meanwhile, as he said, although he could suit the magazines, he could not hit the public."

The experience of these years, the club life and the Bohemian life, was afterward minted into sterling fiction and made precious chapters in *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Philip*. Such odd resorts, half bar-room, half club, as the "Back Kitchen," and the "Cave of Harmony," gave Thackeray a part of his recreation in those lonely years between 1840 and 1846. He learned to know the whole world of Grub Street and when in after years he depicted it without reserve—its foibles, its vanities, its jealousies—he was accused of being a snob and of "fostering a prejudice against literary men."

The association in the popular mind of Thackeray with snobdom dates from 1846 when the famous *Snob Papers*, afterward collected as the *Book of Snobs*, began running in *Punch*. We should notice that it was a sharp and satiric subject, one with which he could give vent to his bitter mood, that enabled Thackeray to write with sufficient edge to cut his way through the public indifference. "*The Snob Papers* had a very marked effect,"



to quote from Sir Leslie Stephen, "and may be said to have made Thackeray famous. The success of the *Snob Papers* perhaps led Thackeray to insist a little too frequently upon a certain variety of social informity. He was occasionally accused of sharing the weakness which he satirised and would playfully admit that the charge was not altogether groundless. . . . Thackeray was at this time an inhabitant of Bohemia and enjoyed the humours and unconventional ways of the region. But he was a native of his own Tyburnia forced into Bohemia by distress and there meeting many men of the Bludger type who were his inferiors in refinement and cultivation—Thackeray an intellectual aristocrat though politically a liberal was naturally an object of some suspicion to the rougher among his companions. If he appreciated refinement too keenly no accusation of anything like meanness has ever been made against him."

A great deal has been made of the charge that Thackeray was morbid on the subject of snobbery. Says Mr. Whibley, who never loses a chance to be hard upon him, "the truth is Thackeray had 'an eye for a snob'; he tracked snobs through history as certain little dogs in Hampshire hunt out truffles. Wherever there

was a man he saw a snob; if the man were of high rank, he overvalued himself; if he were of low rank he overvalued others. Lady Bareacres is a snob because she spends more than she can afford: Lady Scraper is a snob because she prefers a mutton chop eaten in splendour to a whole saddle consumed at Brixton; Sir Walter Raleigh was a snob, because, being a loyal courtier, he spread his cloak beneath the feet of his sovereign."

Mr. Whibley's book is a valuable contribution to the study of Thackeray because in it a number of relationships between the novels and their "sources" have been clearly traced and compactly presented. But from first to last it is void of humanity. Upon matters purely technical, Mr. Whibley is admirable. If the problem of a great author's life could be solved by conceiving of him as a trinity of pen, ink-pot and sheet of paper, Mr. Whibley would be the man to do it. The idea that a writer like other men has his soul—and that the state of it must always contain his final secret—is, to Mr. Whibley, an exploded superstition. When one is freed completely from that troublesome and old-fashioned belief, and can put in its place a conviction that the real world is one's table top, one may, if one is

clever, become a sparkling writer for whom everything is on the surface. Mr. Whibley is very clever but he writes down his own condemnation in his final chapter when he says that what Thackeray "was at the beginning he was at the end—a man of letters to whom time and experience gave not a new style, but merely a better control of his material." Style, technique—in a narrow case,—is all Mr. Whibley can see. Otherwise he is literarily colour blind. But the great thing in Thackeray is the revolution in his "material" wrought by time and experience through the development of his religious sense. His style may not have changed radically but his "tone" did. Censure which he deserved when he wrote the *Book of Snobs*, ceased afterward to have point. What Mr. Whibley says against him fits the despairing Thackeray of the age of thirty-five. We shall see how such censure ceased to apply.

That year, 1846, beheld the appearance of *Mr. Titmarsh's Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*. It was based on a trip to the Levant made two years previous when the directors of the Peninsular and Oriental Company had presented Thackeray with free passage.

In *Frazer's*, during 1846, appeared his first great achievement, *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*.

This powerful novel, however, was not successful and was not reprinted as a volume until long afterward. To-day, the exclusive student, profiting by the accident of a special training, reads *Barry Lyndon* and exclaims "What a wonderful work of art! How obtuse was the audience which did not perceive its excellence!" With a shrug of disdain, perhaps, he turns the cold shoulder to that whole world which applauded Dickens during ten hard years before Thackeray got a hearing.

Undoubtedly *Barry Lyndon* is one of the most remarkable performances in fiction. But just as surely it could never be popular. The fact that Thackeray wrote such a book, while struggling to establish himself, shows that he had failed signally to allow for the difference between the point of view of the artist and the point of view of the audience. This, I think, is the true explanation of his slow acceptance by the public. We of the Gothic races do not as a rule have much capacity for getting pleasure from watching an artist at work. With us, as a rule, the subject is before all else. Our popular writers know



this by instinct, and build upon it. They make their methods mere pack horses for their matter. But now and then we have an artist so stubbornly of the other sort that only after a long beating will he take the public at its word, cease to think first about method and begin thinking first about matter. Thackeray was such an artist. No one ever expressed more exactly the characteristic feeling of such an artist than he did in those fine sentences in *Philip* which describe the painter, "J. J." at his easel. Thackeray loses himself in his sympathy with the mere technical battle against lights, shades, tones, and tints. He forgets, for the moment, whether it is the blush of a peach or a woman which the painter seeks to express. He forgets everything but the struggle of the artist with his technical difficulties. His sympathy is as deep, his enthusiasm as real, as if he were watching an army in its assault on a fortress. When the painter, calling up his last reserve, puts forth his entire strength and advancing along his whole line, takes the difficulty by storm, Thackeray throws up his cap and wants to shout for joy.

What stood in Thackeray's way was the inability of his audience to have similar feelings for a book. He kept forgetting the value

which his audience set on subject matter. So vivid was his own interest in how things were done that he was willing, almost to let his subject take care of itself—to write on whatever came uppermost in his mind—and seek to make his effect by the way in which his material was handled. Herein was his contrast with the other of “the great twin brethren of the novel.” Dickens advanced into literature along the broad high road of the significance of subject matter. The youthful author of *Pickwick* stepped confidently on the stage and claimed the attention of his audience by right of the diverting information he would impart. The youthful Thackeray, without that consciousness of some definite thing to say, but aware of his artistic superiority, found it hard to understand why his work did not take.

The subjects which rose of themselves to the top of his mind were too sombre for his audience, and he, being deficient in the instinct for matter, was too willing to let them pass unchallenged, too ready to spend his whole strength upon the difficulties of expression. In a word, Thackeray, the born stylist, was prone to forget that there are other things in a novel beside style.

The admirer of *Barry Lyndon* must be able

to lose himself in the love of style. Otherwise the book would be intolerable. For, in this, his first novel worth the name, Thackeray set himself a great task but one in which the subject matter cannot possibly attract us. In doing so he built to some extent on his savage and unpleasant *Catherine*, of six years previous.

The words in which he describes the former book apply equally well to the latter, "it being from beginning to end, a scene of unmixed rascality performed by persons who never deviate into good feeling."

So much for the repulsiveness of the subject. The greatness of the artistic achievement is in this: it exposes a scoundrel through his autobiography. Thackeray indeed had his courage about him when he attempted it.

To invent a career in which, from the first action to the last, there never shall be one moment of unselfishness, nor one glimmer of real affection; to put the tale of this career into the mouth of the wretch himself; to make him candid and yet keep our interest: this is an undertaking to which few novelists are equal. But just this is what Thackeray did and the result is a tour-de-force of the first magnitude. Barry is perfectly frank; he conceals nothing:

we know he is an arch scoundrel—cheat, liar, gambler, brute—and yet he never becomes a mere monster, he always retains a touch of grace, and he keeps our interest. Furthermore, his self-revelation never appears to be forced. While we listen, it seems quite the natural thing. Only in retrospect do we realise how unnaturally frank he has been. As sheer art, this first of Thackeray's great creations is equal to any.

The materials of the book may be traced, first of all, in Thackeray's own experience. The external misfortunes of his youth were due chiefly either to the dissembling greed of a gambler or to the selfish wiliness of schemers. Throughout his novels, the gambler and the schemer are most frequent among the human causes of unhappiness. In the darkness of his earlier mood Thackeray combined the two, called the result *Barry Lyndon*, and fairly gloated upon the masterful subtlety with which he exposed its evil. However, the piecing together of episodes into a general narrative came hard for him and in order to get assistance in constructing Barry's career he appears to have had recourse to several books.

First of all he drew from Fielding. In *Jonathan Wild* he found a model by which he



profited in everything relating to method. This great book, like *Barry Lyndon*, is the sustained portrait of a scoundrel, and like it is a triumph of art. For one of the most striking episodes in *Barry Lyndon*, that of Duke Victor and his wretched wife, Thackeray was indebted to a book called *L'Empereur, on dix ans sous Napoleon*. The portrait of Sir Charles Lyndon is supposed to be a study of Charles Hanbury Williams, described by Mr. Whibley as "a great wit in a witty age, a diplomat and man of the world, whose fate was as hapless as Lyndon's own." Three historic characters were drawn upon for Barry's adventures—that famous prince of gamblers, Casanova; the singular English scoundrel, Andrew Robinson Stoney; and an Irish blackguard called Tiger Roche. To the latter Mr. Whibley assigns a good deal of the character of Barry and perhaps has reason to do so. To the "memoirs" of Casanova is due, beyond a doubt, Thackeray's general knowledge of the gaming life of the eighteenth century. The main action of the book seems to have been derived chiefly from the career of Stoney.

That blackguard, after marrying one heiress and abusing her, made a capture of the blue stocking countess of Strathmore, of whom

Lady Lyndon is an echo. "Even in the smallest details the similarity of truth and fiction is evident," says Mr. Whibley, speaking of the debt of the novel to the career of Stoney. However, we must always allow for Mr. Whibley's desire to steal a morsel from Thackeray's credit, though, as he points out, a passage which he quotes from a chap book of the day, fits "Barry and his spouse to a hair." The passage is as follows: "Here then were joined in holy wedlock, two such as for the honour of nature are seldom to be seen. The one had broken the heart of a former wife: the other had not lengthened the days of a former husband: in a battle royal of a main of cocks, the two surviving ones contend for existence, and thus are these two pitted as if by positive destruction."

From these materials Thackeray constructed a character which absorbed into one great portrait the very essence of that whole world of heartless and false people who were attacked in the *Book of Snobs*. Barry's idea of being a gentleman is to dress well, to wear a sword with grace, and to be on easy terms with the great. He is a professional gambler who has played in every capital of Europe. "Play grandly," says he, "honourably. Be not of

course, cast down, at losing; but above all be not eager at winning as mean souls are." His manners, his gentlehood, his air, all these are put on from without like a garment. He does not know that they are. He believes in them thoroughly. Just the same there is nothing genuine in him but his selfishness, his audacity, and his wits. Here is his philosophy:

"The broker of the exchange who bulls and bears, and buys and sells, and dabbles with lying loans, and trades upon state secrets—what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in teas and tallows, is he any better? His bales of dirty indigo are his dice, his cards come up every year instead of every ten minutes, and the sea is his green-table—You call the profession of the law an honourable one, where a man will lie for any bidder—lie down poverty for the sake of a fee from wealth; lie down right because wrong is in his brief. You call a doctor an honourable man,—a swindling quack who does not believe in the nostrums which he prescribes, and takes your guinea for whispering in your ear that it is a fine morning. And yet, forsooth, a gallant man, who sits him down before the baize and challenges all comers, his money against theirs, his fortune against theirs, is proscribed by your

modern moral world! It is a conspiracy of the middle class against gentlemen. It is only the shopkeeper cant which is to go down nowadays. I say that play was an institution of chivalry. It has been wrecked along with other privileges of men of birth. When Seingalt engaged a man for six and thirty hours without leaving the table, do you think he showed no courage? How have we had the best blood and the brightest eyes, too, of Europe throbbing round the table, as I and my uncle have held the cards and the bank against some terrible player, who was matching some thousands out of his millions against our all, which was there on the baize! When we engaged that daring Alexis Kossloffsky, and won seven thousand louis on a single coup, had we lost we should have been beggars the next day; when *he* lost, he was only a village and a few hundred serfs in pawn the worse."

The career of this audacious poser, whose real name was plain Barry, begins in Ireland, where his family, he tells us, is of the highest rank and seated at a place called Barryville. As a mere boy he reveals that heartless addition to pose, joined with absolute selfishness and a boastful faith in himself, which he continues to reveal in every act of his life. His



adventures include two terms of service as a soldier—one forced upon him by law and terminated by his desertion: the other brought about by kidnappers who entrap him into the army of Prussia—the discovery of his uncle, Chevalier de Balebari, a professional gambler of whom, thereafter, he is a confederate: a bold, brilliant and abominable course in the Duchy of X, where he and his uncle acquired influence through notes accepted by them at the gaming table, and where they laid a great scheme to force a marriage between Barry and the Countess Ida, a scheme that failed and involved them in the tragic episode of Duke Victor and his Duchess because of which they were driven from the duchy and wandered about Europe; at last, Barry came to England and made a match with the widowed Lady Lyndon whose name he assumed.

From the moment of this great triumph for the adventurer, his star begins to decline, which fact is significant of the mood Thackeray was in when he wrote the book. I have said that in his earlier novels the gambler and the schemer are the chief human causes of unhappiness. There is another cause, in those earlier novels, which is not human. It is fate. Later on, Thackeray was to change his

point of view; the inward drama was to include a victory over his belief in fate; but when he wrote *Barry Lyndon*, that time had not come. In 1846 he still felt that a malign fate had the best of it in this world. Therefore, though Barry Lyndon, like an evil conqueror, rides down the hearts of those that trust him, he is all the while going straight into the shadow of a giant cloud which he, in his blindness, cannot see. It is the cloud of Sorrow which, for Thackeray, at thirty-five, overhung the world. There comes a time when fate turns upon Barry Lyndon, when in spite of his audacity, all the fruits of his triumphs disappear; when accident dogs him like a shadow; and our last view is of a broken, dispirited, unhappy man borne down by all conquering sorrow.

Again, as in connection with the *Snob Papers* we should notice that Thackeray hits his vein artistically in the vengeful expression of a bitter point of view. But again we are impressed by his deficient instinct for the matter, his slight understanding of his audience. What the audience would take, in small doses mixed with humour in the *Snob Papers*, they rejected without conditions when presented to them in a great mass without humour to sweet-

en it. The *Snob Papers* comprise forty-four ironic miniatures; each one portraying a single aspect of meanness. *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* forms one stupendous monument. The former we can accept, one by one, without feeling that the world is bad. The latter, so far as subject goes, is one great arch of darkness. To care for it we must be able—either by temperament or training—to follow Thackeray at his desk precisely as he followed J. J. at his easel; we must enter into the difficulties of the undertaking; estimate with accuracy the forces he can put into the field; comprehend the generalship with which he uses them. Few people read books in this way, and *Barry Lyndon* was submitted to an audience which was peculiarly incapable of doing so. It was an audience which, with good right, was growing weary of the prophets of despair, and was crying out either to be amused or be made hopeful. Therefore it had turned to the inflexible but buoyant Dickens, who, in that weary and disillusioned nineteenth century was the literary general of the forces of hope. Therein lay the secret of his great influence. He was really a gigantic pamphleteer who organised the cheerfulness of his time and led an assault upon the citadel of despair. When

almost every one else was hopeless; when Carlyle, in the tones of an expiring tempest was thundering to the world that our mission is but to endure and die; when Tennyson, melodiously miserable, could not make hope robust; when all the voices of revolt were repeating Shelley—

“The world is weary of the past,  
Oh might it die or rest at last—”

when all this was going on, no wonder the average man valued Dickens as he valued sunshine, and gave little heed to a novelist who had not yet broken away from the wailing chorus of the voices of woe, whose book was a despairing epic on the lordship of evil over life, the lordship of Sorrow over all.



## CHAPTER IV

### VANITY FAIR

**I**N 1846, Thackeray could not longer endure the separation from his children. He took a house, 13 Young Street, Kensington, brought his children thither and went to work on *Vanity Fair*. In that house, during 1846 and 1847, almost all of the book was written.

Though *Vanity Fair* is probably the chief support of his reputation with the general reader, it is the least Thackerian, in certain respects, of all his books. It presents several curious problems, of which the most obvious, and also the easiest to solve, is the presence of two distinct sorts of humour. One we recognise as Thackeray's own; the other is an intruder. It is so well marked, however, that we have no trouble determining whence it crept into the fold. The influence of Dickens has borne fruit and it is Dickens' humour which is the alien element in *Vanity Fair*.

To characterise either sort in a word, or a

phrase, is a risky matter. And yet, if one should venture to do so, one might say that the humour of Dickens is pre-eminently the humour of the inconsequent. In Dickens we get inured to the gymnastics of feeling, we see emotions performing on the high wire, we listen to the roar of the pit and grow dizzy at a succession of lightening transformations. An idea starts out in a guise which we think we recognise, toward a goal which we think we see, and then—high presto!—by a change too quick to detect, it has shuffled into another garb and we must grin at our fooled expectations.

In the true Thackerean humour there is something which is harder to phrase. Its surprises are not inconsequent. What makes us smile is not the sudden capering of ideas but, rather, an unforeseen bathing of them in strange light. One is forced back upon the hackneyed similitude of the sunshine rifling through clouds. But like a certain sort of actual sunshine—whose peculiar brilliancy, the gift of unfallen rain, has in it something wistful, something prophetic of its end—so the sunshine of Thackeray's humour glimmers across unshed tears.

I may be yielding to a temptation to clear

Thackeray at the expense of Dickens, but surely it was not Thackeray's true self that sprinkled *Vanity Fair* with its bad puns. It was not the Thackeray of the XXXth chapter who wrote "what is the rack in the punch at night to the rack in the head of a morning?" Dickens for all his greatness—and we should be on our guard nowadays to see justice done him—was capable of just that. What Dickens never could have done, what is Thackeray's normal vein, is such a remark as the delicious sneer, "it was only by her French being so good that you could know she was not a born woman of fashion." Furthermore, at many places in *Vanity Fair*, there is something not like the best of Thackeray in the choice of place for the introduction of burlesque. Many a time when we wish to come up square against fact and see the subject through our own eyes, the author intervenes and plays the part of a talking showman—as Dickens does—revealing to us not fact but an exaggerated version of it intended to be funny. A typical example is the introduction to the reader of Amelia Sedley who "could not only sing like a lark, or a Mrs. Billington, and dance like a Hillisberg or Parisot; and embroider beautifully; and spell as well as a dictionary itself;

but she had such a kindly, smiling, tender, gentle, generous heart of her own, as won the love of everybody who came near her from Minerva herself down to the poor girl in the scullery and the one-eyed tart woman's daughter, who was permitted to vend her wares once a week to the young ladies of the Mall. She had twelve intimate and bosom friends out of twenty-four young ladies."

No amount of writing such as this can make us sure that we have looked Amelia in the face. This is not portraiture but burlesque, not Thackeray but Dickens. It is worth noticing, however, that this vein gradually wears out as the book progresses. Emmy enters upon the scene as a puppet from the tiring room of Dickens but in the course of the performance she gradually becomes alive and by the time she makes her final exit she is a human being.

In the first two-thirds of the book, at least, it would seem as if Thackeray, having awakened to his need of a model, had accepted Dickens without discriminating between his strength and his weakness. Perhaps this very lack of discrimination helped *Vanity Fair* with the crowd, for its laughable characters are sketched in those broad outlines so dear



to the lover of Dickens. One hesitates to say that dear old Peggy O'Dowd is a closer kinswoman of Dickens than Thackeray; and yet, when one reflects how uniform is the impression produced by her, how close she comes to being an embodied characteristic, how consistent she is, one cannot but recall the method of portraiture of such an immortal bit of grotesque as, say, Mrs. Harris. When we look at some other of Thackeray's feminine types, at Lady Jane, for example, are we quite persuaded that Mrs. Nickleby herself does not hide among their dresses at the back of a closet? Certainly, when we contrast Mrs. O'Dowd, or Lady Jane, with such a typical Thackerian as old Miss Crawley, the difference in the temper and the method of delineation is not to be denied. The two former, however Thackeray came by them, are of the school of Dickens; the latter, like a piece of nature, transcends all schools and is Thackeray's own.

And yet, in certain respects, the school of Dickens was just what Thackeray needed, for Dickens, the supreme story teller, was especially strong in those directions where Thackeray was most weak. The knack of putting events together so as to form what will be

called by the general reader a "good story" is the main secret of popular success and Thackeray managed to do so just once. *Vanity Fair* is a "good story"—a good story of the school of Dickens.

It is worth our while to observe the mere method by which the story is told. Becky, of course is the central figure and Amelia serves to illuminate her by contrast. The book opens with Becky's first matrimonial campaign in which under the protection of ineffectual little Amelia she lays seige to Amelia's hulking fool of a brother, Jos Sedley. Her scheme is foiled by Captain George Osborne for no reason but that he expects to marry Amelia and looks on Becky as an adventuress to whom he does not care to be related. Captain William Dobbin also had a hand in pulling Sedley out of danger. At the very start we see that Captain Dobbin is in love with Amelia; Captain Osborne, in love only with himself; while Amelia is in love with Love. Becky is entirely the mistress of her emotions. By the failure of this first campaign the group of people who were in sight as the curtain rose is broken up. Becky goes to Queens Crawley to be a governess there while Amelia remains at her home in Russell

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Square. For a time we pass back and forth between these two portions of the original group, and presently we are aware that in both portions the same event is coming forward. Before long it occurs. Each girl by her marriage sets her husband in opposition to tryannic selfishness and so loses him a fortune. Becky marries that famous buck, Rawdon Crawley, who is thereupon disinherited by his aunt, rich old Miss Crawley; Amelia marries George, whose father has quarrelled with old Sedley and now wishes to break off the match. George, having resisted his father, is also disinherited. Major Dobbin, silently devoted to Amelia, takes a chief part in bringing her marriage about.

Now occurs an episode in which the leading persons of the original group again come together and the duel of the opening episode is repeated with a variation. As both girls have married soldiers there is nothing forced in bringing them together at Brussels on the eve of Waterloo. We should remember here that in the opening episode Becky was driven off the field by George. At Brussels she again attacks him but with a new purpose. Since her defeat at his hands she has become an artful campaigner and has married a blackguard.

George, in love only with himself, is already tired of his child wife, and Becky flirts him under her thumb while her husband fleeces him at cards. George proposes to run off with her, and only his death at Waterloo saves Amelia from knowing. Thus Becky gets her first revenge. ↴

Again the group breaks up and again we are kept in touch with both fragments. But this time, instead of reflecting they contrast each other. For both women, Waterloo was the crisis. Becky left Brussels confident in the power of her arts and bent upon being a woman of fashion, come what might. Amelia, whose people had been ruined by the war, absorbed herself in the attempt—not always well directed, for she was not a very wise little person—to do her duty.

In each life, however, there was repeated that same duel with tyrannic selfishness in which both women became involved when they were married. Becky, after Waterloo, ↴ matched her wits against the great Marquis of Steyne with whom she sought to deal as previously with George Osborne. Amelia was challenged by another brutal egoist, her husband's father, for possession of her boy. In both cases the egoist won. Becky missed it



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↙ with Steyne; was found out by Rawdon; and disappeared from view. Amelia, to save her child from poverty, gave him up to his grandfather.

↘ In course of time Dobbin, whose love for Amelia was as faithful as ever, came back from India where he had been in service, bringing Jos with him, and Amelia's fortunes began to mend. After awhile old Osborne died and Amelia and her son were reunited. Still Dobbin loved Amelia and Amelia went on loving Love to which she gave the face of George. At last all these made a trip to Germany and at the little town of Pumpernickel whom should they come upon but Becky. Though holding to the fringe of respectability with a somewhat doubtful clutch she was still unalterably herself, still delightfully undismayed, and at once she resumed her influence over Amelia. Here, then, for the third time we have the original group and as the episode progresses the original issues—with final variations—are repeated. Again there is the duel between Becky and George, this time for the deliverance of Amelia from his memory. Becky gets her crowning vengeance when by revealing George's perfidy at Brussels, she at last opens Amelia's eyes and thus the reign of

that false saint is ended. However, Amelia had already discovered where she really stood and Dobbin was even then upon his way to claim her. The only remaining issue is the matter of Becky and Jos. The schemes which had failed long years before bear some sort of fruit at the end of the book and when we see Jos last he is wholly under Becky's influence.

The materials of the book have caused much discussion. Mrs. Ritchie is uncertain whether any particular person sat for the portrait of Becky. She more than half suspects, however, that she once had a glimpse of Becky's original and writes of her thus: "One morning a hansom drove up to the door and out of it there emerged the most charming, dazzling little lady dressed in black, who greeted my father with great affection and brilliancy, and who, departing presently, gave my father a large bunch of fresh violets." At one time an absurd tale went about to the effect that Becky was Charlotte Brontë, and that Miss Brontë, to get even, pictured Thackeray in her character of Rochester. This was mere nonsense on both counts. If we are to find a literary portrait of Thackeray, dating from 1847, we must look for it in his own book. And

though we are told that in John Allen, Archdeacon of Salop, Thackeray got a hint for Dobbin, surely upon this point there is more to say. One must be near blindness not to see that if we subtract the genius from William Thackeray as he was at thirty-seven and add a few disguises like big feet and an awkward manner we have a large part of the material of the patient major. Of Amelia, Thackeray said that he got hints of her from "his wife, his mother and Mrs. Brookfield." The two persons in *Vanity Fair* whose origin is generally supposed to be established are Lord Steyne and his parasite Mr. Wenham.

The former is supposed to have been studied from the Marquis of Hertford. That singular nobleman was a person of much more versatility than Lord Steyne but in many respects their careers are identical. Like Steyne, Hertford was a gambler, both shrewd and daring; an abandoned sensualist, incapable of permanent attachment to any creature; an unscrupulous egoist, overshadowed by the dread of inherited insanity. On the other hand when Lord Hertford was decorated with the Garter, Sir Robert Peel wrote, "I was really pleased at Lord Hertford getting the garter. I was pleased very disinterestedly,

and for his own sake, merely, for I like him. He is a gentleman, and not an everyday one." The Duke of Wellington said of him that "had Hertford lived in London instead of frittering away his time in Paris, he would have become Prime Minister of England." Plainly there was a brilliant and attractive side to this vicious nobleman which Thackeray omitted in composing Steyne. Taking only the bad side of Hertford, Thackeray has reared upon that base a colossal image of the brutal selfishness of the tyrannic male. A heavy, dominant, ruthless, heartless, dictatorial, self-indulgent, overbearing despot—Steyne! It is this dreadful personality, the Prince of Egoists, who for Thackeray at thirty-seven was the lord of the world. In him all the evils of egoism culminated making a vast symbol of successful selfishness which might well be called Beelzebub.

According to report another famous egoist, Disraeli's Monmouth was also studied from Lord Hertford. Mr. Whibley, ever ready to cast a stone at Thackeray, undertakes to show that Disraeli's portrait is far the more successful, and would dispose of Steyne as being chiefly "a matter of buck teeth" and bad manners. There is some truth in the sneer.



The lover of Thackeray would like to have Steyne less a monster, more a merely wicked human. But Mr. Whibley need not have gone out of his way to produce a rival to Steyne and by implication set Disraeli in higher place. If we turn from Steyne to Thackeray's later version of the same idea, to Lord Ringwood, in *Philip*, we see that with time the melodramatic in Thackeray disappeared. Again, the real explanation is simply that in *Vanity Fair* he is always near the shadow of Dickens. That shadow is coming and going everywhere across the book and at times falls heavily upon the figure of Steyne.

To pass from the Marquis to his creature, we come to another of Mr. Whibley's opportunities. In *Coningsby*, Disraeli drew a portrait labelled Nicholas Rigby, which is really a study of John Wilson Croker, who was also the original of Wenham in *Vanity Fair*. "While Steyne is overshadowed by Monmouth," writes Mr. Whibley, "Wenham is completely eclipsed by Rigby." He devotes five and a half pages to the relative merits of the three persons, Croker, Rigby and Wenham, always with an eye to the disparagement of Thackeray. When we recall that Wenham is a very minor character, very


lightly sketched; that he emerges into prominence only once, and then merely as agent of Steyne to smooth things over with Mrs. Crawley's husband; it is hard to see why Mr. Whibley should make so much pother about him. Perhaps we are tempted by an uncharitable suspicion that Mr. Whibley, like so many of the seekers after "origins," is betrayed in making much of trifling discoveries not because they throw light on Thackeray but because they show the cleverness of the trifler. In fact Mr. Whibley gives his hand away and cuts the ground from beneath his feet by two incautious sentences. He says of Wenham, "the portrait in brief, has neither the force nor the rascality which distinguish Mr. Nicholas Rigby, the villain of *Coningsby*, after whom rather than after nature it seems to have been drawn." Again he says, "Thackeray, when he sketched Wenham, had in his mind's eye the conventional portrait of John Wilson Croker." Had Mr. Whibley been seeking disinterestedly to form an estimate of Thackeray, these remarks, with perhaps another or two, would have served his turn. But his animus will not let him rest. Though he declares that Wenham is drawn "after Rigby rather than after nature," and that in doing

so Thackeray used a "conventional portrait," he goes on to cry Thackeray down because he did not see fit to make a study of the remote original from which this conventional portrait derived. The truth of the matter is simply that Thackeray, in a novel of sixty-seven chapters, introduces a character whose function is to be in sight around the edge of the scene, do a single mean act and figure prominently in just one chapter. In so slight a part Thackeray can afford to imitate Shakespeare, as well as almost every other novelist and playwright that ever lived, and without troubling himself to create a character, use a stock type. He does so. The same stock property had been used shortly before by another brilliant novelist "after whom rather than after nature," Thackeray's sketch seems to have been drawn.

Setting aside these comparatively small ones among the problems presented by *Vanity Fair* we approach another which is not small. How are we to account for the buoyant tone of the book? Why is it that *Vanity Fair*, coming right on the heels of *Barry Lyndon*, that masterpiece of dreariness, has a dash and "go" that sweeps us along irresistibly?

There is nothing in Thackeray's personal

life to account for the accession of spirit that enlivens *Vanity Fair*. He was still lonely to an extreme. He still brooded upon life with the same passionate appreciation of its evil and its sorrow. When we look close into *Vanity Fair* we perceive that its buoyancy does not rest on that part of the book in which the mere man as distinguished from the craftsman is revealed. In this case Dickens did not influence him and the contrast with Dickens helps us toward a clue, for the buoyancy which we find in Dickens is based upon that part of him which lies beneath the artist, on the man's personal conviction of what life signifies, his conviction that in the long run things somehow straighten themselves out; that though God works in a mysterious way, still, even in this life, God is here helping us inscrutably toward our salvation. But in *Vanity Fair* all the underlying conviction as to how things happen in life is either hopeless or ironical. Episode after episode, though we have laughed over it as it progressed, ends in failure. Even the end of all, the glimpse we get of Dobbin and Amelia married, is unsatisfying. It hints that Dobbin did not rise to our expectations. The very last we hear of Amelia is a sigh. And the





book ends with those famous but—even though Thackeray wrote them—unmanly words: “Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?—Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.”

No, the buoyancy of *Vanity Fair* is not a matter of the point of view. We are still in the second act of Thackeray's spiritual drama, and not yet is there light in his darkened heaven. In order to reach the secret of the buoyancy we must leave for the moment the ordinary way of looking at a novel and take up something, at least, of Thackeray's own attitude toward J. J. We must turn back to *Barry Lyndon*, put its subject out of our heads and look at it purely as a piece of style. Having once brought ourselves to this point of view we shall be startled by the impression which we receive. We shall become aware, throughout that stern book, of a rising tide of artistic self-confidence which before we had missed. We see now, that as Thackeray went forward with that great undertaking he discovered his powers; as difficulty after difficulty went down before him, routed horse and foot, he came first to believe in, and then to

exult in, his artistic destiny. To take a metaphor from the life of Napoleon, *Barry Lyndon* was Thackeray's campaign in Italy.

We now have the secret of the buoyancy of *Vanity Fair*. It is the sheer "joy of the working," that first enthusiasm over his own initiation into technical mastery, which has come to every great artist at a certain point in his career; has made distinctive what the critics call his "first manner"; and then has left him. In the case of Thackeray this discovery of a technical enthusiasm must have had double significance, because, for the moment, it must have delivered him from himself. In the nature of things the "joy of the working"—in this limited sense—cannot last very long for the charm of it is based upon surprise, but while it lasts it is one of the most powerful stimulants in the world. If the evidence of the mere writing counts for anything, Thackeray worked this stimulant to the full in *Vanity Fair*.

It is this buoyancy of the mere craftsman which permeates the book; which moves everywhere as if in flashes of light among those stern ideas which still remain fixed in Thackeray's mind, which the joy of the working is powerless to change, but around which

it spins an illusory atmosphere of flashes. Thus it comes about that when we have learned to see through this brilliant effect of style—for that is all it is—we see that the stern ideas are still there in unchanged grimness and only to our dazzled eyes have their outlines appeared to be softened—like ugly things beautified by dawn. We see that here, just as truly as in *Barry Lyndon*, colossal egoism dominates the scene. We see goodness linked always with futility; evil, splendid and triumphant; and over all, Sorrow like an emperor. The very heart of the book is in that final cry, “which of us is happy in this world?”

Having trained our eyes so that we can see clearly through the dawn shimmer of the style of *Vanity Fair*, we perceive within that shimmer a procession of egoists who incarnate the mercilessness of fate. The procession opens with George Osborne, who is followed by that larger edition of the same thing, his repulsive father; behind them come the two Crawleys, Pitt and his Aunt; alongside whom moves the detestable Mrs. Bute Crawley and her drinking husband; and the odious Lord and Lady Bareacres; until the series culminates in the great Steyne.

They are all described so aptly, with such

graceful deliberation—as if the writer thought of nothing but how to phrase them—that we catch for the moment his apparent detachment and forget to think upon their significance. When, however, we grow familiar with the phrasing, the question of significance asserts itself, and then we catch the tune to which the procession moves. It is a dead march wailing, “Which of us is happy in this world?” And the dead march is not merely over the victims whom the colossi trample beneath their feet. The egoists themselves are no happier than the rest. All are chasing a will-o’-the-wisp. “Which of us has his desire?” is the dirge for the fallen, blending immediately with the requiem over the victors—“or having it is satisfied?”

Were it not that we catch from the author some portion of his own joy of the working,—which is here so potent that it infects us without our being aware,—this procession of the egoists would be intolerable. That same infection is all that enables us to look calmly upon the fallen. When we strip them of the wonderful style by which they are enrobed we are tempted to say they come nearer, even than the egoists, to being Thackeray’s condemnation. Every one of them lacks either



force or charm. Not one of them has any appreciable effect upon the course of events. The battle of life rides over them and goes on and they are left among the lumber. Amelia, Dobbin, the poor old Sedleys, neglected Lady Steyne, persecuted Lady Gaunt, kindly Lady Jane, even great hearted Peggy O'Dowd and her brave Mick, are all ineffectual. Imagine what *Vanity Fair* would be, were Dobbin withdrawn from it and in his place put a strong, vehement and intrepid goodness—a man as bold as Steyne. Unfortunately, for Thackeray, at thirty-seven, that could not be. People to be loved, to be protected, to be wept over, but not to be relied upon beyond a certain point, are the goodnesses of *Vanity Fair*. Not among them is the courage that burns its ships, the intense concentration that goes blind to its own peril, the indomitable energy whose recoil when it is denied an outlet spells destruction. Steyne, evil as he was, had something of these qualities. Dobbin with all his virtues had none of them.

But to resume upon the "joy of the working." The final monument of it, the real reason why *Vanity Fair* survives, is yet to be named. It is well at this point to turn our eyes for an instant to that earlier, happier,

more triumphant artist, to Shakespeare. In him we discern the clear limits of a "first manner." We mark off that period in his life when he like Thackeray was intoxicated by his own power to do things. We see how the throb of his joy, seeking a perfect vehicle for its expression, singled out and made immortal that part of himself which was most in tune with it. The result was one of the greatest love poems ever written. To the measureless good fortune of all after time, Shakespeare, in his first manner, had still an unclouded heaven, he devoutly believed in Love, was not the least afraid of Death, and had an almost boyish faith in the final rightness of everything. Therefore, his first manner culminates in Juliet.

How different was Thackeray's mood we have seen. But he, also, like Shakespeare, like every great artist in this stage of his development, longed to fashion a creature who should incarnate the great qualities that were just then active in himself. To do so, it was necessary that he find a character of a sort he could believe in, whose wrestle with life was as dauntless as his own wrestle with artistic difficulties. Had he been happy, had he been Shakespeare, he would have found in his memory some,

glorious figure of unfaltering love; had he been bravely sad—which alas! we must admit he was not—his memory would have yielded to him some image of noble sacrifice. Being what he was, he found an image in which the buoyancy, the audacity, the fortitude, of the artist were translated, neither into love nor sacrifice, but into worldliness. He named this image Becky Sharp.

And what a wonderful image it is! How gallantly the little adventuress matched her wits against the world. With what courage she went alone on her campaigns! How firmly she kept up her spirits. Never once did she falter. Defeat could not break her down. Fearless, gay, self-reliant, she wrote "fortune my foe!" on her banner, and when everything she cared for was on the cast, played her hand without trembling. The cards were always against her; the advantage of the ground was always with the other side; in none of her greater campaigns did she have an ally; always her enemies had enormous odds; and yet, not once did she lose heart. And her equanimity never rested on indifference. She is one of the most tense characters in fiction. The bow is strung every minute of her career. No general in the midst of a great campaign,

no politician when the fate of his party is in the balance, no lover who is engrossed in his passion, could pursue an ideal with more uncompromising devotion. With the ardour of a true lover she saw in her mind's eye the substance of things hoped for; with the courage of a great soldier she went gallantly to the attack, laughing at her immense disadvantage; with the heroism of a strong mind she forbade herself a single instant of the luxury of self-pity.

And now for the other side of the picture: if only Becky could have been good! Or, to come at it the other way round, think what *Vanity Fair* would be did some of its good people share her power. Think of Dobbin with Becky's audacity; Amelia with Becky's charm.

Yes, and think what Becky herself might have been had fortune been on her side; think of the part she might have played as a grande dame. Her intuitive sense of proportion, her natural delicacy—I had almost said her natural purity—her courage, her amiability, her lack of malice, her poise, her serenity, her charm—these are what we should have known in Becky had she changed places in youth with, say, Lady Mary Caerlyon. Had she, and not



that sweet futility become the Marchioness of Steyne we should be celebrating to-day, the skill, the audacity, the devotion, with which she played her husband's hand and at last made him a Duke and Prime Minister.

But in *Vanity Fair*, this cannot be. Here, nothing must go right. Becky, the supreme opportunist, can be a good woman on ten thousand a year but has not the stuff to be good in adversity. Therefore, she must have adversity for her portion so that Life may break and ruin her, for such is the function of life in *Vanity Fair*. The constant limitation in Thackeray's first manner is the obligation in his own mind to make everybody fail. He will not spare his most brilliant creation, not even this "dauntless worldling" whose wealth of sheer courage is the chief factor in keeping his book alive. When everything has been allowed for, and we come to the conclusion of the whole matter, we find that it is this: *Vanity Fair* is a great but mournful symphony built in every part on the one theme, "Which of us is happy in this world?"

## CHAPTER V

### END OF THE FIRST MANNER

THE custom of issuing novels in monthly numbers had been made popular by Dickens and was followed by Thackeray. The first number of *Vanity Fair* appeared in January, 1847; the last one in July, 1848. The tradition is that he received fifty guineas a number.

*Vanity Fair* did not immediately capture its audience and the opening numbers were neglected. Very soon, however, its great qualities began to be appreciated. In September, 1847, Mrs. Carlyle wrote to her husband that it was "very good indeed" and "beats Dickens out of the world." In January, 1848, the earlier numbers were reviewed by Abraham Hayward, in *The Edinburgh*, and highly praised as "immeasurably superior to all Thackeray's previous work." By this time the public generally held a similar view and people were talking of Thackeray as a great novelist. In May, 1848, Monckton Milnes

wrote that he was "winning a great social success, dining at the Academy with Sir Robert Peel." Trollope writes, "in that year 1848 his name becomes common in the memoirs of the time. On the 5th of June I find him dining with Macready to meet Sir J. Wilson, Panizzi, Landseer, and others." The same year Macready notes that he "dined with Forster, having called and taken up Brookfield, met Rintoul, Kenyon, Proctor, Kinglake, Alfred Tennyson, Thackeray." In the same year, 1848, a testimonial was sent to the rising genius from that city of Edinburgh which had done such honour to Dickens seven years before. Eighty Scotch admirers including Dr. John Brown, the author of *Rab and His Friends*, presented Thackeray with a silver ink stand. It will be remembered that he was thirty-seven in July, 1848, and that the last number of *Vanity Fair* appeared the same month. At thirty-seven, then, Thackeray had "arrived."

He took his success quite simply and naturally. He dined with the Duchess of Bedford, or the Duke of Devonshire, or Peel, or Landdowne, and was frankly pleased to be made much of by the great. Of course silly people have sneered at him, and tried to show that he should have made a niche for himself in his

gallery of Snobs. As if the world's recognition of a hard fought victory should not stir a man's blood! Thackeray was above such affectation. He neither pretended to despise his fame nor allowed it to make a fool of him. He did not forget that his business was to write books and to keep on writing books. But none the less he was set up in spirit because that merciless London "Society," which had no regard for any but them of power and influence, set its stamp on his success. He sums up his feeling in those two oft-repeated sentences upon Lady C,—“beautiful serene, stupid old lady . . . she asked, ‘Isn’t that the great Mr. Thackeray?’ O! my stars, think of that!”

Two of the most singular details of his life fell in at this time when he had but newly “arrived.” He seems to have had an almost morbid fear of not providing adequately for his children and to have undervalued the hold he had got on the public. He dreaded an abandonment by that fickle mistress. We see, in all this, the same oversensitiveness which led him in his earlier books to luxuriate in unhappiness, which led him now to brood upon the possible catastrophe that might lie hid in the future. Under stress of



his solicitude, he forgot to judge himself by the standard he set up for the world. This is what explains a move made in May, 1848, when Thackeray got himself called to the bar at the Middle Temple. The apparently pointless procedure—for he does not seem to have had the least idea of practising—appears to be explained by the fact that shortly afterward Monckton Milnes made an attempt to get him appointed a London Magistrate. For Thackeray, the satirist of placemen and pensioners, to become a magistrate through sheer “pull” would have been too bad and the ill judged attempt fortunately failed. The same fate overtook another piece of inconsistency. Trollope relates that Thackeray had become acquainted with the Postmaster General, Lord Clanricarde. In 1848, the place of assistant secretary at the General Post Office became vacant and Lord Clanricarde wished to give it to Thackeray. Says Trollope, “Lord Clanricarde either offered it to him or promised to give it to him.” But his lordship had reckoned without his host. His political associates protested. Thackeray knew nothing of the business of the post office and if appointed would come in over the heads of men of tried experience. There was such vigor-

ous opposition to his appointment that Lord Clanricarde did not stand to his guns and the matter was dropped.

A more proper incident was the appearance in November, 1848, of the first number of *Pendennis*. Thackeray worked upon the book as it came out, keeping ahead of the publishers as best he could, and this accounts for a break in the publication during 1849. Thackeray fell ill and came near to death but was saved by his admirable physician, Dr. John Elliotson, whose name he has immortalised in the grateful dedication of *Pendennis*.

This brilliant novel makes an end of Thackeray's first manner. *Barry Lyndon*, *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, these three form a group. They are united by that "joy of the working," which Thackeray discovered in *Barry Lyndon*; by means of which he rose to such heights in *Vanity Fair*; and upon which, like an eagle sailing with spread wings out of the morning, he rested in *Pendennis*.

The success of *Vanity Fair* and the artistic confidence sprung from that success had borne immediate fruit. From that time forward Thackeray trusted himself as an artist. He threw off—in most respects for good: in some, perhaps not—the influence of Dickens. Cer-

tain things with which he had forced himself to wrestle in *Vanity Fair*, he let go. The whole of his attention was now centred upon those phrases of his art which appealed peculiarly to his temperament, upon the style, the details, the portraiture. The general plan he neglected.

Contrasting *Pendennis* with *Vanity Fair* the difference between the two is very notable. From *Pendennis*, the burlesque tone, the exaggeration of characteristics, the straining to be funny—the Dickens elements in the style—have all disappeared. Real people step forth from the page and look us square in the eye. When Thackeray talks himself he is but one of the company: no longer the genial showman interposing his whimsical version of things between us and the fact. But, also, there is the other side to the change. All that sustained attempt to relate everything to everything else, to make it all tell in developing a central theme, has for the present disappeared. There is hardly a beginning; certainly no middle; and the end would seem but a matter of space. "We have run far enough," the author seems to say, "let us end."

The story has but one thread like a loosely knit biography. Pen was born and his father

and mother were so-and-so; he went to school at the Charterhouse; his father died while he was at school; he came home and had a tutor; he was the apple of his mother's eye; he fell in love, as he thought, with the beautiful Miss Fotheringay, the daughter of Captain Costigan, of Costiganstown, Ireland, descended of kings, but at present supporting her father by her labour as an actress; he was pulled out of the scrape by his worldly old uncle, the Major; he was sent off to college, at Oxbridge; he was rather gay there and spent more than he had; he was later sent to the Temple where he grew intimate with George Warrington; he had his little flirtation with little Fanny Bolton; he nearly died of a fever; he sidled away from law into literature; he had a long absurd and unnecessary flirtation with Blanche Amory; there was a misunderstanding between himself and his mother; it was made up; at last he succeeded; finally he had sense enough to get his eyes open and ask Laura who is ten times too good for him but whom we have known all along was being kept in reserve to make a proper finale as the curtain falls.

The rambling course of the narrative makes possible the introduction of all sorts of in-



cidents. For example, there is the story of the French cook Alcide Merabolant, who was in love with Blanche and declared his passion through his tarts and got into various troubles. There is Chevalier Strong and his queer ways of living—"Ned" Strong as he was called—who held the office of general conciliator in the household of the perfectly worthless Sir Frances Clavering and his vulgar, good-hearted, much abused wife, who had an Indian fortune and was called "the Begum." Like Wenham and Wagg, in *Vanity Fair*, and others later, Ned Strong is a professional toady and hanger-on. He lives off his patron, conducts a hundred bits of shady business for him, and is generally a parasite. Then there is the unfortunate Harry Foker, a better hearted version of young James Crawley of *Vanity Fair* who was so skilfully euchered out of the game by his uncle the worthy Pitt. There is a group of literary "gents," Paternoster Row people, scribbling adventurers. This group was a stock property with Thackeray and was repeated almost man for man in *Philip*. They are extremely entertaining and there can be little doubt that in creating them Thackeray drew on his memory. What happened to

Pen and Philip in their attempts to get started as writers pretty certainly had happened before to William Thackeray.

Naturally attempts have been made to discover originals for these "gents." This is the sort of thing in which Mr. Whibley, like that famous character in Dickens, "comes out strong." A dozen of his pages are devoted to a discussion of Thackeray's Grub Street. "Bungay," says Mr. Whibley, "is an unamiable portrait of Colburn the publisher, while Archer . . . is none other than Tom Hill of the Monthly Mirror. . . ." Shandon is a portrait of Maginn that talented Irishman who turned Chevy Chase into Latin, Homer into an English ballad and "from a garret in Wych Street" sent forth a prospectus of "the whole art and mystery of writing a paper," much as Shandon did from the Fleet prison.

In connection with *Pendennis* a charge is made by Mr. Whibley which having been brought, must be reckoned with. In his eagerness to decry Thackeray, he brings into court, as a witness of the Englishman's inferiority, none other than Balzac. *Pendennis*, says Mr. Whibley, "has the same motive as *Tom Jones*, *Gil Blas*, *Le Pere Goriot*. In other words it describes the impact of an enterprising ad-

venturous youth upon the world. But unlike the heroes of the other masterpieces I have mentioned, *Pendennis* moves in a formal little circle not of his own choosing. His adventures are limited not merely by his lack of courage, but by a narrow ruthless convention of life. From the very first he is taken charge of by the tyrants of habit and custom. He is pushed along the common groove from school to college, from college to London, until he reaches the comfortable goal of fiction—a blameless marriage. When Rastignac emerged from the humble boarding house near the Pantheon, he was fortified by the predatory philosophy of Vautrin to make war upon society. Pendennis found a mentor more circumspect than Rastignac's. His Vautrin was the admirable Major whose cynicism conceived nothing worse than an entrance into the best houses and a rich alliance. But while Rastignac remains a triumph of romantic portraiture, Pendennis ends as he began, an intelligent meritorious young gentleman." To Mr. Whibley's way of thinking the contrast between Vautrin and Major Pendennis should lead us to "understand the difference not merely between the talent of Balzac and the talent of Thackeray, but some-

thing of the difference between France and England."

In these passages occurs more than one misrepresentation into which so clever a man as Mr. Whibley would not have been betrayed except through partisanship. To begin with there is his misuse of "motive." By a literary motive we mean, of course, that idea in which is contained the secret of a book's individuality. Obviously this must be something distinctive. No loose, general idea, capable of being stated a hundred different ways, can with justice be called a literary motive. To get at the motive of a book we must pare down and make detailed our large vague impressions and thus, at last, detect that special intention lying back of the book by reason of which it is separated from all others. For example, if we said that the motive of "Romeo and Juliet" was youthful love we should be little nearer the fact than if we said that the motive of the play was human life. Both statements are hopelessly vague. If we said that "Romeo and Juliet," "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "The Day Dream" all had the same motive, because all deal with the beauty of youthful love, we should be talking nonsense. In each poem, the poet has made so



delicate, so individual, the idea which he has to express, that the similarities of the three are effaced by their differences. The same may be said of the four books lumped together by Mr. Whibley. To say that *Pendennis*, *Tom Jones*, *Gil Blas* and *Le Pere Goriot* all have "the same motive," and that this motive may be expressed in so loose and vague a phrase as "the impact of an enterprising, adventurous youth upon the world," is to fling away all accuracy of description. We might as well say that every young man leads the same life as every other because in every case worth mentioning we have "the impact of an enterprising, adventurous youth upon the world." We should then demand that Mr. Whibley enlarge his group of the brethren of *Pendennis* and include about a thousand plays, poems and novels, beginning with the *Iliad* which records the impact upon the world of an enterprising adventurous youth named Achilles and coming down even to *Captains Courageous* in which, according to Mr. Whibley's reasoning, we find the same motive as in Homer.

The contrast between Thackeray and Balzac is so point blank that no one will question it. The strange thing is why anybody

should lug it into court. To belabour Thackeray because Pen is not Rastignac is neither more nor less in point than to denounce Balzac for not being Homer. To say that in the contrast between the Major and Vautrin is a clue not merely to the difference of the two novelists but of the two nations is fantastic to degree. The task of candid biography in connection with *Pendennis*, as with all the novels, is simply to account for it, to locate in the experience of the author the source of its ideas. When that has been done the motive of the book may be formulated far more accurately than by an unsympathetic comparison with a masterpiece of a totally different sort.

We have seen in what mood and under what conditions Thackeray worked upon *Pendennis*. At a time when he gave very little thought to his matter, and put almost if not quite his whole strength upon the manner, he tried to follow up *Vanity Fair* by a lighter, more graceful work. For materials he plunged into his memory, that enormous scrap book of odds and ends, and drew from it a great variety of diverting recollections. But with these, unfortunately—as we shall see in a moment—came up once more his gloomy and pessimistic views of life, his sentimentality.

Publishing the thing piecemeal and working on it from hand to mouth, under compulsion to fill a certain amount of space each month, he made no attempt to join all the parts into a consistent whole, dominated throughout by a central idea. To make up for this lack, he redoubled his attention to detail, relying mainly upon that mastery of style which he saw he had attained. Obviously, of a book so conceived and so executed, we cannot say, even though it contain the adventures of a young man, that its literary motive is "the impact of an enterprising, adventurous youth upon the world," or consider for a minute the grouping of its hero with Achilles and Rastignac. The real motive of the book is lyrical rather than epic; the mood of the author, not the hero's adventures, is the genuine subject.

This is the reason why the charm of *Pendennis* is mainly in the details. Again the clue to it all is the style and in the best part of *Pendennis* we have the height, as we have the end, of Thackeray's first manner. Here the ideas glide easily, with no "fussing under the bows"—as they say of a ship that cuts smoothly and steadily through the sea. The thought passes into our minds so delicately, with so little commotion, that it has become

part of us before we have will to question. What we notice chiefly in the effect of it is a constant element of not disquieting surprise. Every little while comes an easy turn of some sort, there flashes up within us something charmingly unusual and we find ourselves thinking about things as we never had expected to do. The best of these little surprises in ourselves is that they always seem to come naturally and when once they have occurred we feel they are all that ought to occur.

At first blush we get from all this, as from the style in *Vanity Fair*—even more so, in fact, for this is still better done—a general impression that the book is gay. Careless people are deceived and put it down for one of the gayest novels in the language. But look close and see what is behind the gaiety. Listen with the inward ear and catch the meaning of its accent. Is it of the mind or of the heart? Is there anything here of the young Shakespeare? Is it not, after all, that same illusion of the manner of saying things, of the mere style, that deceived us in *Vanity Fair*?

By now we should have grown used to the shimmer of this wonderful style and should be able to see through it. Doing so we perceive a widely different world from that of the



lordly youths of Shakespeare—Romeo, Orlando, Henry V. Here, youth is not a conqueror. Far from it. The gallant blunder, the brave folly, the chivalrous misconception, the attractive weakness—it is among these that the modern stylist takes his jaunty course, beckoning us to follow. What deceived us at first blush was the airy lightness of his step. Surely, we thought, one who walks so gaily, so debonairly, must be going to a wedding. But did not French ladies trip lightly up the steps of the guillotine? We have heard how they practised it, by means of a chair upon a table, in their prison yards. And if some heroic little countess who had done that ghastly rehearsal without a fault of grace, cried gaily to her fellow prisoners for their applause, may she not have been holding back the tears and saying in her heart, “Which of us is happy in this world?”

The moment we reflect, we perceive how subtly the mere manner of *Pendennis* has deceived us. We find that we have been chatting over two of the saddest of Thackeray’s creations and laughing over two of the cruellest. We have seen all manner of things go wrong, and only a few go right. We have been at elbows with injustice, falseness and

heartbreak. And all the while we have been laughing. We see now that it is the laughter of despair much more nearly than of mirth. We see why Trollope insists "that he is always within his own bosom encountering melancholy with buffoonery and meanness with satire."

However, did I have to choose one episode which standing by itself should be the representative of Thackeray's first manner, I would choose the episode of the Fotheringay. To my mind it combines as does nothing else in that manner lightness with substance, grace with significance, naturalness with power. In every line of it there is that precision of stroke which does not come until success has bred confidence. Also, there is that intimacy between the maker and his material which shows that he is past the period of experiment. He knows both his powers and his limits and does not waste time trying to do things he cannot do. As to the contents of the episode, we catalogue among them, the finest old snob in fiction, the best Irish blackguard, one of the most ironic misanthropes, one of the most sufficing symbols of the placid egoist, and a perfectly delightful exposition of the engaging folly of youth.

But along with the charm of the first manner we have in *Pendennis* its underlying wretchedness, its false conception of life. Among the half dozen tragedies that are pieced together to make the dark foundations of this glittering fabric, two are of chief moment; and both give opportunity to the enemies of Thackeray to accuse him of sentimentalism.

Of these, the greater is the story of old Bowes who taught the Fotheringay her art. The bitterness that lay at the bottom of Thackeray's first manner found its crowning expression in the relation of those two. And all his thinking about them is false. Bowes, the lame musician, the ruined and hopeless dreamer; Fotheringay, the serene and perfect egoist, heartless, mindless, soulless, pure self with only beauty to make it evident; those two and their relations to each other are not an expression of human life but of Thackeray's warped conception of life. In Fotheringay he has merely changed the sex of his eternal egoist and ironically decorated it with an outside of feminine loveliness while vulgarising it through the lack of mind. It is a wonder that Mr. Whibley, in his zeal to find fault with Thackeray, has not pointed out that Miss

Fotheringay artistically is daughter and heir-ess to the Marquis of Steyne and that in her as in him Thackeray has exaggerated his image of egoism until it is almost melodramatic. In the case of Fotheringay he is even worse than with Steyne, for he gave the Marquis some great qualities and did not try to make us believe that anybody loved him. But with her, though depriving her deliberately of every possible attraction except beauty—reiterating that she is simply a great, stupid, impressive animal—he rings the changes upon Bowes' hopeless love. Bowes knew that she was stupid, knew that she was an animal, knew there was nothing to her but her beauty, and yet his infatuation instead of being held up as a symptom of something wrong in himself, is used as a sort of wailing chorus, sounding melodiously at the back of things, like the sound of the sea in a shell. The truth is poor old Bowes—if we are to take him as a man and not as a mere symbol—was a sentimental-ist. It was not that dull woman—that glorified cow—with which Bowes was in love, but a dream in his own mind which he sought to make the woman express. When we cut deep into his melancholy, we find that the heart of it is baffled love of himself.



However these two are not really to be thought of as persons. They are but symbols—Fotheringay of that malign fate which we are asked to believe rules the world, Bowes of its shadow upon mankind—and in their relations to each other is that formula of human life which underlies the whole of the first manner. Really, Mr. Whibley should have noticed this.

The other of the two tragedies that are all wrong is the story of George Warrington. Thackeray has endeared him to us not by what the man was in himself but by the inimitable way in which his author wrote of him. Again, it is the style that is deceiving us, sentimentalising us. We are told that Warrington flung away his life, led a useless existence upon the outskirts of Bohemia, and if we demand why, we are asked gravely to believe the following: when very young he had been caught by a vulgar woman—another Fotheringay apparently—and having come to his senses he lost desire for fame and position for if he gained them his wife would assert her claim to him. To get rid of her he condemned himself to be a do-nothing. In these few words the story is ridiculous. But in Thackeray it is very different. Through the magical skill of his style

Thackeray imposes on us yet once more, gets possession of our hearts, and, first thing we know, we are weeping over Warrington as over a suffering hero. But when the tale is over and the spell of the telling has worn away, we can see that we have been fooled. Perhaps we lose our tempers and ask sarcastically why didn't Warrington force the situation—defy the woman, or make her over, or go to the colonies, or do something—instead of smoking out his life doing nothing. In such a mood we are tempted even to call his story bosh.

But even now we are not done with the cruelties that underlie this apparently gay book. We have still to reckon with Blanche Amory. She and the Fotheringay are the two entirely heartless creatures who move like clouds across the page. Her cruelty to Foker is a sort of burlesque parallel to the cruelty of her rival to Bowes. As to artistic descent, Blanche's pedigree is not so plain. There is a certain kinship with Becky but it were best not to press the point. She is youthful egoism. It is an ugly theme, not often expressed, hardly worthy to be expressed. One is almost tempted to hope that no one will ever express it again. The picture is exaggerated—as of course we should expect at this period in

Thackeray—and the lines of it are laid down with a contempt that is almost savage. We shudder and turn aside. Here is Becky minus her charm, minus her courage. Here is the real, last analysis of what Becky signifies. Let us drop the curtain.

Over against these powerful images of evil stand two inadequate images of virtue, Pen's mother and Laura Bell. Alas! the constant limitation of the first manner. It cannot unite goodness and power. Laura is almost colourless. Mrs. Pendennis, for all her sweetness, her self-sacrifice, is without mind and exacts full return for her affection. Not to mince matters, she is emotionally a tyrant. She is just to Pen only so long as he obeys her. A hint of Rawdon's treatment by his aunt survives in the treatment of Pen by his mother. Even this devoted mother is, in a way, an egoist. Will Thackeray never have done with this cruel theme?

To speak of *Pendennis* without saluting the Major, would of course, be incredible. But with so famous a personage it would hardly be good form to do more than lift one's hat differentially and pass on. He is the supreme height of polite snobdom.

There is much that suggests autobiography

in *Pendennis*. A great deal of the scenery came directly out of Thackeray's own associations. Pen's adventures in Devonshire, at college and in the Temple are much what Thackeray's were. Naturally there is a temptation to identify Arthur Pendennis with William Thackeray and if we bear in mind Thackeray's tendency to exaggerate the weakness of his characters, the identification may be allowed. In his first manner he was never quite just to anybody, not excepting himself.

It seems plain that Thackeray was not satisfied with his own attempt to write the novel of youth. He makes an end of his first manner with the feeling, apparently, that his work was insipid. All of us remember his famous saying, relative to Pen, that no Englishman since Fielding dared draw a man. This has been construed to signify that Thackeray hankered after the freedom of the French. But those who take that view have forgotten an important bit of evidence. Thackeray is one of the few novelists whose conception of youth involves chastity. He takes pains to tell us that though Pen had many vices there was one from which he was free. His love for his mother kept him apart from all women whom he knew were impure. Surely, it was



not the French freedom to be scandalous for which Thackeray longed, but just what it was he longed for we cannot say. Of one thing, however, we may be sure. Had Thackeray been a happy man, had he not been borne down by his lack of faith in life, he would have been just the one to write the epic of youth, to take youth through its struggles for the sake not of the pathos but the charm. He knew through his own experience what myriad pitfalls surround the tender, the ardent, the believing heart of youth. He knew what harm has been done, is still done, by the immodest veilings spun by prudery. He longed to tear apart the veils, to throw the sunlight into every darkened corner, to show to youth itself the glory of its own being and the pity, the inexpressible pity, of abusing it. But he had not the heart to try. Something checked him, something held him back. He revenged himself by saying that people would not listen. But that was not all. The deeper explanation was his own irresolution, his own lack of faith, his own doubt whether he was not dreaming of fairyland. After all, most youth, like most maturity, showed unpleasing aspects to his biassed eye. He could not write what he did not believe. Thus one of the

great opportunities in literature passed away. The grandeur, the heroism of youth, Shakespeare gave us; the comedy, the pathos of it, Thackeray gave us; the depth and the wonder are still to be told.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE TURNING POINT

**T**HE famous Athenæum Club comes nearer to taking the place of the French Academy than anything else in England. A recognition of Thackeray's success was his election to the Athenæum, February 25, 1851. It has often been stated that he had been previously blackballed but Sir Leslie Stephen declares that the report is unfounded. He adds, however, that an attempt to elect Thackeray, in 1850, was brought to nought by the opposition of a single member. The move to elect him had been supported by Macaulay, Croker, Dean Milman and Lord Mahon.

Thackeray's fortunes were now mending. He had hit fame and was becoming prosperous. Nevertheless he could not lay aside his solicitude over his children, nor cease from his anxiety to make more money. For this reason, by way of pot boiling, he tried his hand at lectures. His six lectures on the

*English Humourists* were delivered at Willis' Rooms between May 22 and July 3, 1851.

A distinguished company attended these lectures which had the appreciation they deserved, though, to Thackeray's over-sensitive mind, the first lecture, on Swift, seemed a failure. He read from his manuscript making no attempt at oratory but producing as all witnesses agree a pleasing effect. The only serious charge which his enemies—Mr. Whibley and others—have been able to advance against the *Humourists* is that the portrait of Swift is overdone. This must be allowed. Thackeray was so struck by the broad traits of evil which form the main lines of Swift that he allowed himself to put into the Dean's portrait much the same exaggeration which he had put into the portrait of Steyne. At the same time we should remember that in 1851 the attempt to prove Swift less black than he had been painted had not begun. Thackeray was but one of many who had fallen into the error of imagining Swift the devil.

The lectures on the *Humourists* are the beginning of Thackeray's second manner. The gaiety of *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, that peculiar brilliancy as of the first hours of the



day, which belongs to the new-found joy of the working, has run its course. The point in the career of any artist at which that first wave subsides is of immense significance psychologically, and when the mind of the artist is not at peace the subsidence of that wave is a moment of crisis. Right there, very likely, he will be weighed in the balance. According as the heart of him is trivial or heroic it will follow either that the ebb tide ends the story, or else that a returning wave more deep and majestic than its glittering predecessor lifts him higher than before. In the life of Thackeray that point of crisis was the year 1851.

Why the change in Thackeray which dates from that year should have begun precisely when it did is hard to say. The evidence upon this part of his inward drama is scant. We may take it on faith however, that the noble heart of the man—and we must remember that his weaknesses proceeded always from misdirected good, never from anything innately bad—had long been slowly making head against his sensibilities. The psychologists say that resolutions are formed in us slowly while we are not aware; that the power to make a decision or perform an act is accumulated

gradually, like the quiet banking up of a stream behind a dam; but that only when the dam suddenly gives way and the stream rushes through do we see what has been coming forward all that long while in our minds. As I say, either the details of this part of Thackeray's drama are lost or his family have not made them public, so that there is a gap in our knowledge of his evolution which must be bridged by conjecture. And as conjecture is unsatisfying I will not be the one who attempts to make the bridge, except by the way of a single suggestion.

The writing of the *Humourists* compelled Thackeray to do justice to several lives in which natures as sensitive as his own bore adversity without flinching. To portray faithfully such a character and such a career as that of Addison, or of Goldsmith, Thackeray had to enter into their minds and look on life with their eyes, make their feelings for the time his own. He succeeded in doing so and I cannot but think that the effect on him was far-reaching. Had he not been ripe to be effected, had not the water behind the dam already risen high, this last addition to it might not have cleft the dam asunder. We must conclude that details which have been lost would have

made plain that Thackeray obeyed the same psychological law as the rest of us and had been preparing for his transformation with very little knowledge, if any, of whither he was tending. When we look forward a few months and note the part which in the scheme of *Henry Esmond* he assigned to Addison, surely we have ground for thinking that in 1851, when Thackeray was at work upon the *Humourists* and later upon *Esmond*, he went apart many times into spirit land and had there long walks and talks with Addison and returned to earth bent on imitating not only in his art but in his life, that gallant gentleman.

However, be this as it may, Thackeray turned at once from the lectures to *The History of Henry Esmond, Esquire, a Colonel in the Service of Her Majesty Queen Anne, written by Himself*.

Not content with his general knowledge of the age of Anne he read much in the library of the British Museum and the Athenæum Library, and made every effort to be accurate in detail. The manuscript now at Trinity College, Cambridge, shows, in contrast with his earlier manuscripts, very few corrections. He had acquired the practised hand which

hits its mark at the first stroke. The date of the completion of *Esmond* seems to be fixed by a letter of Fitzgerald, dated 2 June, 1852, in which he says it "was finished last Saturday." *Esmond* was not published in numbers and Thackeray kept the entire manuscript before him until it was sent to the publisher. This, doubtless accounts for its comparative brevity—it is only about half the length of *The Newcomes*—and for the closer weave of it. There was no obligation to fill space at all cost as there was with those other novels which came out in monthly numbers while Thackeray was still at work on them. *Esmond* had a good sale from the first and returned Thackeray on the first edition £1200.

In writing this famous novel, so often called his masterpiece, Thackeray fell back upon his earlier tour-de-force, upon *Barry Lyndon*, in which he had proved to himself that he could write a fictitious autobiography and make it express in every line not his own personality but that of the supposed author. The subtlety of his mind delighted in such an undertaking, in its demand for deftness, for tact. Not a statement, not an opinion, not a recollection of Barry Lyndon's, but was coloured by the man's feeling and compelled



to reveal his nature. In *Esmond*, Thackeray repeated at greater length but with a less difficult subject the same extraordinary feat. Having gathered together various types and set them down in the history of the time of Anne he gives us not his own version of what they were, and how they did, but the version of one of the actors in the piece. From beginning to the end, it is never Thackeray who speaks, always the melancholy Colonel Esmond.

The world which Colonel Esmond knew, which that eminent literary person has described so remarkably, was on the outside the world of Queen Anne. Its events were the events of that reign. But let us not be deceived. Colonel Esmond lived in a Reign of Anne which was especially constructed for his use and whose people, with very few exceptions, are people not of the eighteenth century but of the first manner of William Thackeray. The book does not become intelligible biographically until we grasp this fact. In *Henry Esmond* we have the people of Thackeray's first manner, presented to us through a new medium, and made to enact for our amusement an historical drama. The novel must not be classed with those which

went before, for in *Esmond* there is a new temper which sets it aside and because of which we say it is in Thackeray's second manner. However, though Thackeray's temper has changed, his material is still in the main what it has been. For the originals of the people in *Henry Esmond*, for the source of its conception of life, we should look not to history but to that peculiar assemblage of ideas in which Thackeray moved and had his being between thirty and forty.

Nothing is more fundamental in that world of the first manner than the prevalence of an ironic fate. In the world of Colonel Esmond this is duplicated. All the circumstances of his life move in tune with the old refrain—which of us is happy in this world. We see him first in his youth, when he is supposed, and supposes himself, to be the natural son of the former Lord Castlewood and therefore a mere dependent on the present lord. For that reason in his relations with the lovely Lady Castlewood, and her charming children, Frank and Beatrix, in spite of all their kindness, he can never quite forget how fate has dealt with him. And then by a sudden stroke of fortune the situation is reversed and the irony made ten fold more oppressive. Lord

Castlewood, dissolute and a gambler, whose wife we discover is very jealous, falls into reckless habits and the result is his duel with Lord Mohun. On his death bed he tells Henry the truth, that he is true born and the rightful Lord. But ironic fate has Henry in its grasp. He has accepted so many favours of this Lord and his family, his own sensibilities are so potent, that he feels he cannot assert himself. Therefore he stands by and lets young Frank succeed. But again his position becomes ironical. Lady Castlewood, conscious that she has not loved her husband, seeks to clear herself to her conscience by a violent parade of grief, and incidentally by refusing to have more to do with Henry, nominally because he did not prevent the duel, really because she is, and now admits to herself that she long has been, in love with him. So fate acts throughout the book. Always in all Henry's version of human affairs, there is the malign influence, coming we know not whence, but having the effect of thwarting our heart's desire. As a soldier, as a politician, as a lover, as a man, he is always crossed by destiny. In the wars, he moves with awed hatred in the shadow of the dreadful Marlborough, that heartless impersonation of fate; he sees his dear General

Webb cheated of the credit for his brilliant victory of Wynandael; and at last he sees Marlborough fall for no apparent reason except that it is the fate of everybody to go down. In politics there comes a time when he mixes boldly into the great game of foisting the Pretender on the nation at the death of Anne but again the malign influence that rules the affairs of men interferes; the Pretender slips away from London into the country after the bright eyes of Beatrix and so the one moment when he might have won the game is lost. As a lover, having been reconciled to the Castlewood family he dangles after Beatrix for near ten years, while she, according to his account of her, plays the part of a heartless coquette and is—by implication—impervious to all the noble qualities in man. And Beatrix also is cheated by fate, for the great Duke she was to marry is killed, shortly before their wedding day, by that same Mohun who killed her father. Finally, Lady Castlewood, who all this while has really been in love with Henry and jealous of Beatrix, becomes his wife. That is the last arch irony of all as Thackeray has made plain in *The Virginians* where we have a glimpse of Esmond, long after, resigned but not happy, a distinguished,



melancholy gentleman, who is still at heart in love with Beatrix.

The origin of the chief people in this troubled assemblage is quite plain. Perhaps the most obvious is Marlborough. He is but the climax of Thackeray's procession of colossal egoists. He is Steyne translated into an Olympian. His shadow makes a darkness upon the world over which he rises like some beautiful evil spirit "having this of the god-like in him that he could see a hero perish or a sparrow fall, with the same amount of sympathy for either."

Mr. Whibley, always lying in wait to cast a stone, makes a great fuss about the portrait of Marlborough. He implies that in painting it Thackeray illustrated the unlimited capacity of sentimentalism to believe in badness. He points out that the Marlborough of *Henry Esmond* is not only false historically but absurd as an image of a man, that it is mere melodrama. Having cited the scene at the banquet where Webb hands the *Gazette* to his chief on the point of his sword, he exults in the assertion that even Thackeray did not dare, once he had brought the great Duke upon the scene, to make him anything but master of the situation.

What a lot of pother about nothing! If Mr. Whibley would only bear in mind what Thackeray was doing in *Esmond* all his righteous indignation would disappear. All he has said is true but it hits not Thackeray but Colonel Esmond. As well be angry with Thackeray because things are seen out of focus by *Barry Lyndon* as because the same happens with *Henry Esmond*. In his way, the latter is as far from a normal character as the former and he reveals his bias in the huge melodramatic monster which he seeks to impose on us as John Churchill. The way in which his fiction collapses into nothing the moment we face the actual giant—though he makes only two remarks and these of the simplest—is one of Thackeray's fine achievements.

The real hint which we should get from the unreal image of Marlborough is that Esmond is not an accurate reporter; that he does not see people as they are. How anyone should fail to observe this fact—especially after *Barry Lyndon*—is strange. Esmond's view of life is so definite and so perfectly sustained that we must allow for it at every turn. Nevertheless Thackeray seems to have had a fear that people who read with but one eye might miss the point and therefore, twice, by means of foot-

notes, he thrust it in our faces that the whole of Esmond's performance is what actors call "in character." One of the two notes explains that a certain passage was inserted into the memoirs in Esmond's old age when if not a better he was at least a wiser man than in those earlier days when the memoirs were written and the great Duke was so grossly libelled. Colonel Esmond was not of large enough nature to make a generous apology for his libel, but even he, upon mature reflection, felt that some sort of retraction was due. Accordingly, "on a fly leaf inserted into the ms. book and dated 1744" (so says the note) he made this grudging and ungenerous admission of his own lack of candour: "Should any child of mine take the pains to read these his ancestor's memoirs, I would not have him judge the great Duke by what a contemporary has written of him. No man hath been so immensely lauded and described as this great statesman and warrior: as, indeed, no man ever deserved better the very greatest praise and the strongest censure. If the present writer joins with the latter faction, very likely a private pique of his own may be the cause of his ill-feeling."

One would think that this were enough to put even a careless reader on the right track

but Thackeray, to make assurance more than sure, added that other note, the little essay inserted in the memoirs by Esmond's grandchild, beginning, "Our grandfather's hatred of the Duke of Marlborough appears all through his account of these campaigns," and closing with "He was as constant in his dislikes as in his attachments; and exceedingly partial to Webb whose side he took against the more celebrated general. We have General Webb's portrait now at Castlewood, Va."

Remembering, then, that we have in the portrait of Marlborough not an authentic likeness of the great Duke but only a record of his impression on Henry Esmond—the impression he made on a sensitive and unforgiving nature—we turn to another portrait drawn by the same hand and more famous even than that of Marlborough. We may note in passing that previous to *Henry Esmond* Thackeray had not put a masculine and feminine egoist of the first magnitude into the same book. Though *Vanity Fair* had Steyne it had no corresponding woman. Though *Pendennis* had the Fotheringay she was without a counterpart among the men. But *Esmond* has them both. The same idea that is at the bottom of the Fotheringay—the idea of utterly merciless



beauty—is dignified with birth, wit, courage, and given the name of Beatrix Esmond. In her and Henry,—as the latter believes, at least,—is such a relation as existed in *Pendennis* between the Fotheringay and Bowes. I insist that this is Colonel Esmond's version of the facts and not necessarily Thackeray's. To Colonel Esmond's eye, Beatrix was a heartless flirt, whom he worshipped for ten years, to whom he offered sacrifices daily, but who was dead to love. At last, in sheer disgust at her heartlessness he turned haughtily away from her and married—O irony of ironies!—her mother. And the melancholy Colonel, who does not appear to have known that humour existed, could write this down and leave it behind in his memoirs!

We must never forget in discussing this novel that *Henry Esmond* is modelled on *Barry Lyndon*. The fact that Colonel Esmond is a gentleman, and that his ideas have much in common with our own should not hoodwink us. In the earlier autobiography we never forget that Barry is talking because at every turn we perceive his separation from ourselves. But in the case of Colonel Esmond, all his ordinary ideas are the ordinary ideas of the people we know, and by these ideas we are thrown off our

guard so that we forget at times that on extraordinary matters he is sharply, invariably himself. Therefore, we must bear in mind that his version of Beatrix is a prejudiced one. An exacting and jealous man—for such he was—has painted pretty black the beautiful woman whose heart he could never touch. But the question arises, “Is Beatrix a coherent character?” Mr. Whibley seizes upon her as one more count in his charge against Thackeray. He declares, in substance, that she is not a person, only the most beautiful of lay figures. In reply, I would ask the reader to experiment. Suppose we break off in reading *Esmond* at the death of the Duke of Hamilton. Is not the Beatrix we know, then, a person? I believe she is—a beautiful, brilliant, hard, but not necessarily an evil, being. Suppose now, we put aside, if we can, the thought of that Beatrix and turn to that other of the last episode of the book, the Beatrix who made such a dead set at the Pretender, who spoiled his chance for succession to the crown, then followed the worthless young fool to Paris and ended her career in a way *Esmond* scorns to tell. Is the latter a real person or a piece of melodrama? If she is real, does she unite with the first?

For my own part I feel that we have here two creations, that the first and the second cannot be wrought together as one person, and that the later Beatrix is melodramatic. In the first Beatrix Thackeray started out to give us a portrait of a genuine, splendid human flirt. Afterwards in another, and perhaps a truer book, he did what he here set out to do and the result was Ethel Newcome. But in *Esmond* he allowed himself to be side tracked and fell back upon melodrama to the tune of Bowes and the Fotheringay. Even when we allow for the exaggerations due to Esmond's disposition, the later Beatrix is an odious and unreal creature who is a libel on the first.

The Beatrix who talked to Esmond in the fifth chapter of the third book—that day he gave her the diamonds and Duke Hamilton resented it and Lady Castlewood revealed the secret of his birth—is a real person not without a heart. Had Esmond been worthy of her—but here are her own words: “in eight years no man hath ever touched my heart. Yes—you did once for a little, Harry, when you came back from Lille and engaging with that murderer Mohun, and saving Frank's life. I thought I could like you; and mamma begged me hard, on her knees, and I did—for a day.

But the old chill came over me, Henry, and the old fear of you and your melancholy, and I was glad when you went away, and engaged with my Lord Ashburnham that I might hear no more of you, that's the truth. You are too good for me, somehow. I could not make you happy, and I should break my heart in trying and not being able to love you."

Was Henry Esmond to blame because no man ever touched the heart of Beatrix? She cared for him at the one time when he flared up, in her imagination, into buoyant manfulness. But he relapsed almost immediately into gloom and sentimentality and poses. She knew he could never forget himself and hence her fear of him, her sense of oppression when she was with him. Surely, even through the veil of Colonel Esmond's sentimentalised version, the facts are plain. The first Beatrix was a bold and clear-sighted woman who must have for her love a man in tune with herself. At the time when we saw her last she had not found him.

The second Beatrix we may concede to Mr. Whibley. In comparison with the first she is almost vulgar. Her career is the only thing in *Henry Esmond* that may be justly charged against Thackeray and not put down to the



biased view of Esmond himself. The first Beatrix, had she been the heroine of that fine scene in which her mother, her brother and the jealous Colonel reveal to the second Beatrix that they have no faith in her, would have turned on them like an angry queen, and made them appear contemptible. The second Beatrix has so little majesty that we could hardly be more surprised if she let slip an oath. This part of the incident might, to be sure, be accounted for on the ground of the Colonel's misrepresentation but such explanation will hardly clear her for luring the Pretender away at the critical moment and so spoiling the intrigue. We are certainly intended to accept as truth the Colonel's version of her disgraceful later life—all of which in connection with the first Beatrix is unbelievable.

Her mother is the true compliment of Henry. Like him she is a sentimentalist, luxuriating in her own emotions, with a fondness for being unhappy. The base of her, perhaps is Mrs. Pendennis. But though Mrs. Pendennis was weak, tyrannical and suspicious we must not accuse her of too close kinship with the highly sentimental and intensely jealous Lady Castlewood. Let the latter as far as possible stand

alone, a monument of emotional egoism with a smoothly pious front which imposed entirely on itself.

There remains to be accounted for the character of Henry Esmond, and in this character lies the real significance of the book both to the general reader and to the student of Thackeray's development. We find among the earlier figures no one that will serve as original for Esmond and yet the most superficial observer must feel that Esmond's nature is in harmony with the underlying ideas of the first manner. There we have him. Esmond is simply the point of view which lay back of the first manner made into a man.

It is plain that in 1851 Thackeray waked to a realisation of what he had been doing in the half dozen years previous. He saw that he had allowed himself to be sentimentalised, to make a luxury of unhappiness; that he had permitted himself to set a premium on melancholy and to undervalue the duty of cheerfulness; that he had misrepresented the world to his own mind and had paid the price of failing to understand the world. This subject of his mistaken point of view, and of its inevitable results, must have deeply impressed him for he set to work to embody it in a novel. He

created a character which was the perfect expression of that point of view, in whom there were no counteracting elements—such, fortunately, as Thackeray had in himself. That is to say, he made, in mathematical phrase, a *reductio ad absurdum*. Therefore the character was melancholy, sensitive, brooding, egoistic, sentimental, and all these to an extreme. About this character he placed such a world—except for a single great exception—as he had himself seen through the medium of his distorted sensibilities. For the text of the novel he set down with utmost skill an account of that world as it appeared to the character. Such is the plain origin of *The History of Henry Esmond*.

Those who are unaccustomed to observe closely the habits of mind of an artist, who have not noticed how his works grow, the later from the earlier, like plants from cuttings, might set this aside as mere accident were it not for two considerations. In *Esmond* Thackeray does two things which he never did before. In the first place he makes a sentimentalist betray his nature. By numerous little comments, chiefly from Beatrix, which the Colonel is sufficiently candid to preserve, we see that she understood, and through

her we come to understand, that the core of Esmond is preoccupation with himself. That is what gets in his way throughout life. He is always nursing his emotions, always luxuriating in his trouble. As an inevitable consequence he never can be happy. His melancholy is no mere accident. By means of it we see judgment passed upon that type of character which is preoccupied with self, that can never forget itself in sympathy with others. No wonder St. John used to call him "the Knight of the Rueful Countenance." No wonder he frightened Beatrix. And all this the reader is made to see very subtly through the words of the man himself. It is vain to call such art accidental.

The other thing which Thackeray had not attempted in any previous novel was the same undertaking which had been forced on him by writing the *Humourists*. Again we wonder whether those lectures do not mark the very crisis of his life. In no work of the first manner is there any strong good man who, though unfortunate, is not cast down, and who was free from sentimentality. In the *Humourists*, for the first time, Thackeray did justice to such characters. Having gone on into *The History of Henry Esmond* he contrived to



take with him the beautiful figure of Addison, and if this book contained no other evidence of a change of mood in the artist the presence of this one figure would be enough. Even through the veil of Esmond's false way of seeing things, that undaunted countenance shines forth. In his quiet way, in a corner of the picture, this man is as essential to the whole effect as even the warrior Duke who overshadows it all. He is a prophecy of what Thackeray will come to in that noble third manner of his, which, at the time *Esmond* was written, still slept in the future. What could be finer than Addison's talk in his garret after the entrance and exit of a brilliant official.

"Does not the chamber look quite dark?" says Addison surveying it, "after the glorious appearance and disappearance of that gracious messenger? Why, he illuminated the whole room. Your scarlet Mr. Esmond will bear any light; but this threadbare old coat of mine how very worn it looked under the glare of that splendour! I wonder whether he will do anything for me," he continued. "When I came out of Oxford into the world, my patrons promised me great things; and you see where their promises have

landed me, in a lodging up two pairs of stairs, with a six penny dinner from the cook's shop. Well, I suppose this promise will go after the others and fortune will jilt me as the jade has been doing any time these seven years. . . . Friend Dick hath made a figure in the world and passed me in the race long ago. What matters a little name or a little fortune? There is no fortune that a philosopher cannot endure . . . 'tis not poverty that's the hardest to bear or the least happy lot in life," says Mr. Addison, shaking the ash out of his pipe. "See my pipe is smoked out. Shall we have another bottle? I have still a couple in the cupboard and of the right sort. No more?—let us go abroad and take a turn on the Mall, or look in at the theatre and see Dick's comedy. 'Tis not a masterpiece of wit; but Dick is a good fellow though he doth not set the Thames on fire."

From this serene man who, no less than Esmond, was made unhappy by a woman, and who by his manful constancy brought her round at last and married her, from him we turn our eyes to the Knight of the Rueful Countenance. Could any contrast be greater? In those two is one more commentary on the line "to him that hath shall be given and from

him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." To the valiant Addison success finally takes its course. From the doubtful Esmond all things desirable flee away. In all of Addison's doings there is the quiet rightness which comes of not exaggerating their importance. To every act of *Esmond* much brooding on its significance has given a touch of unreality. With Addison things come right, at last, because he is enabled through his faith that in the long run nothing can go wrong, to be patient, to endure misfortune, and to seize his opportunity when it arises. Esmond, on the other hand, can never get his way because he never can believe that he will get it—his inclination to feel sorry for himself is always drawing him off to one side for some indulgence in self-pity—and consequently he can make no convincing impression on others. Above all, in every thought of Addison's, there is the belief that behind all things is God's love and therefore, dark though the moments may appear, let not your hearts be troubled. For Esmond, at the back of human life, there is nothing but the caprice of fortune and therefore nothing certain in this world. We can imagine Addison, firm in his conviction that life is not an acci-

dent, that all of us at last come to our own, accepting cheerfully, in the days when his love affair looked the darkest, those spirited modern lines

"You'll love me yet and I can tarry  
Your love's protracted growing  
June raised that bunch of flowers you carry  
From seeds of April's sowing."

Who could imagine Henry Esmond approaching Beatrix in such a mood? Nay, more, we can imagine Addison looking quietly into himself, inquiring whether something were not wrong there and whether the woman so far, had not been wise in holding off. Henry Esmond could no more have made such inquiry than he could have changed the colour of his eyes. It is Beatrix—always Beatrix—only Beatrix—who is to blame because their affair goes wrong.

In *Esmond* Thackeray hit a subtle perfection of art not at all like the simpler "good story" art of *Vanity Fair*, not so likely to be popular, but one that is far more characteristic. The book can hardly be said to have a plot but it certainly has a unity. This unity suggests painting rather than literature. I believe most people, if they examine their recol-



lection of *Esmond*, will find that the impression is not so much of a series of events as of a group of figures. The more we study this group the more we become aware of the significance of Addison. The effect of the whole, its richness, its rightness, its mellowness, depends at last upon that beautiful calm figure in the background. With matchless tact, just as the curtain falls, our eyes are brought around to this figure and we get our last view of Addison, now great and powerful, in a benign attitude of protection. After the utter failure of *Esmond*, it was "by the kindness of Mr. Addison," that "all danger of prosecution . . . was removed."

*The History of Henry Esmond* is like a painting I have seen somewhere of a fall of rain beyond which is a landscape while far in the distance upon some hills the sun shines. At first glance all objects in the picture appear veiled and misty with the rain. But on closer study we become able to allow for the rain as for a transparent mask and through it we make things out in their right forms and range them toward the sunshine at the back. So with this wonderful novel. The gloomy mood of the narrator, his false conception of life, fills the foreground of the picture as if there were fall-

ing before our eyes all the tears of the world. At first sight the whole scene appears to chord with his own dark figure. It seems to be a terrible procession of conquerors, beneath a darkened heaven, moving around captured cities, with trumpets and armour and banners, doing merciless pagan honour to Mars and Venus. However, as the eye grows accustomed to the spectacle, we see that of this great assemblage of figures not all are in the region of falling tears. Rank after rank, they range into the background, growing brighter as they recede, and then, upon a sudden, we perceive that at the back of all is a world of calmness and sunshine. There, the remote key to the whole composition, stands the beautiful figure of Addison.

The significance of *The History of Henry Esmond* is thus revealed. As a piece of thinking it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the mood of sentimentalism. As an incident in Thackeray's biography it marks the point at which he grappled with that evil in himself. In writing this novel he forced his sentimentalism to come forth, to stand apart and take on form so that he might see it plain and know the face of his enemy. Then he cast it from him forever.

## CHAPTER VII

### READJUSTMENT

**T**HACKERAY had prepared his lectures on the *Humourists* with an eye to a tour in America. He sailed from Boston together with James Russell Lowell and Arthur Hugh Clough, October 30, 1852. Innumerable anecdotes are told of his American sojourn. Considering the purpose of the trip, however, the main point is that he went home, in the spring of 1853, with profits that figured up to £2500.

He remained a time in England, then went with his children to Switzerland. The suggestion of a novel which should contain certain people of his childhood had been in his mind for some time and now, thinking upon what he should do next, this idea began to take shape. *The Newcomes* is one of those great works which came into being in the mind of the author almost at a blow. Thackeray's own account of the matter is in the epilogue of the novel and is dated "Paris 20th June, 1855."

"Two years ago walking with my children in some pleasant fields near to Berne in Switzerland, I strayed from them into a little wood; and, coming out of it presently told them how the story had been revealed to me somehow which for three and twenty months the reader has been pleased to follow."

The lover of Thackeray may be pardoned for lingering with fond reverence upon the thought of that day. Mrs. Ritchie's account of it must be quoted: "Some moments have their special characteristics, and I can still remember that day, and the look of the fields in which we were walking, and the silence of the hour, and the faint, sultry, summer mountains, with the open wood at the foot of the sloping stubble. My father had been silent and pre-occupied when we first started, and was walking thoughtfully apart. We waited till he came back to us, saying he now saw his way quite clearly, and he was cheerful and in good spirits as we returned to the inn." Plainly from Mrs. Ritchie's further account the novel was already begun. She continues, "I have a notebook of his for 1853 in which there are some memoranda of that time. We were travelling in Switzerland and Germany. We had come to Baden first of all where he records



various excursions and drives, and notes the books which he is reading, as well as the people he meets:—

“7th July 1853—Began preface of *The Newcomes*.”

The fact that *The Newcomes* was begun at Baden gives a special interest to that group of masterly chapters, XXVII—XXXIV, which are to this novel what the Brussels episode is to *Vanity Fair*. In those chapters occurs the famous “Congress of Baden,” that piece of high diplomacy in which Lady Kew so nearly settles things for all branches of the Newcome family—so nearly, but not quite.

It was from Baden, on his forty-second birthday, that Thackeray wrote to his mother:

“Baden, 18th July, 1853. . . . I have had a hard week’s work and am in No. 2 by this time, hoping to finish said number before the month is over: but I can’t see but it is a repetition of past performances and think that vein is pretty nigh worked out in me. Never mind . . . this is not written for glory but for quite as good an object, namely money which will profit the children more than reputation when there’s an end of me and

money and reputation are alike pretty indifferent. . . . Honest old Miss Claphams are here, and recall the days of my youth to me. I go back to those well-remembered regions to get materials for the commencement of the new story. One of Dickens' immense superiorities over me is the great fecundity of his imagination. . . ."

Commenting on this letter Mrs. Ritchie remarks, "My father was always diffident about his work, especially at the starting of it." His diffidence made him trouble enough but there is another matter touched upon in that letter of his forty-second birthday which he, doubtless, did not appreciate. Though he talks of Dickens' "immense superiority" bewailing his own lack of "fecundity," he should have been thankful on that ground. It is because he was thrown back several times upon the same material that he succeeded, at last, in working out of it all the dross.

In the autumn of 1853, Thackeray was at Paris where the fifth number of *The New-comer* was finished. Toward the end of November he started with his family for Italy, and on the 3rd of December they were in Rome. He worked steadily, Mrs. Ritchie

often acting as his amanuensis. "On one occasion," she tells us, "he was at work in some room in which he slept, high up in an hotel; the windows looked upon a wide and pleasant prospect, but I cannot put a name to my remembrance: and then he walked up and down, he paused, and then he paced the room again, stopping at last at the foot of the bed, where he stood rolling his hands over the brass ball at the foot of the bedstead. He was at that moment dictating the scene in which poor Jack Belsize pours out his story to Clive and J. J. at Baden. 'Yes,' my father said with a sort of laugh, looking down at his own hand (he was very much excited at the moment) 'that is just the sort of thing a man might do at such a time.' It was in this room, in this hotel in past land, that he christened his heroine, still walking up and down the room, and making up his mind what her name should be."

Following up the wander on which this great book was written, we catch a glimpse of Thackeray at Rome walking on the Prado "with . . . Mr. Pollen, and three or four monks and priests in their robes." Mrs. Ritchie remembers "writing for him on a marble table in a great room with many win-

dows, and with walls hung with pictures and ornamented with swinging lamps and classic columns, where pigeons perched on the deep window sills, voices called and *pifferari* droned from the street far below and charming people came to call and to interrupt us—brides and bridegrooms, beautiful ladies, poets, muses, painters with beards and cloaks.”

From these words we turn to Chapter XXXV of *The Newcomes* and find that “J. J. and Clive engaged pleasant lofty apartments in the Via Gregoriana. Generations of painters had occupied these chambers and gone their way. The windows of their painting room looked into a quaint old garden, where there were ancient statues of the Imperial time, a babbling fountain and noble orange trees, with broad clustering leaves and golden balls of fruit, glorious to look upon. Their walks abroad were endlessly pleasant and delightful. In every street there were scores of pictures of the graceful, characteristic Italian life. . . . There were the children at play, the women huddled round the steps in the kindly Roman winter . . . There came the red troops, the blue troops of the army of priests. . . .” How enthusiastically it is all described in Clive’s let-



ter to his father which is the bulk of the chapter.

The visit to Rome was unfortunate in one respect for Thackeray took the fever and his health which had not been robust since his illness in 1849 seems never to have been fully restored. Hereafter, we hear of fits of "spasms" to which he is subject.

Soon after he got up from the fever he heard of the death of one of his aunts. The letter which he wrote, at once, to her daughter contains a paragraph that shows how far he had come from that futile bitterness of the days of his first manner. "So the generations of men pass away and are called rank after rank by the Divine Goodness out of reach of time and age and grief and struggle and parting, leaving these to their successors, who go through their appointed world-work, and are resumed presently by the Awful Power of us all, Whose will is done on earth as it is in heaven, Whose kingdom and glory are forever and ever."

The Thackeray of *Vanity Fair*—the dreary sentimentalist with his everlasting "Which of us is happy in this world"—could not have written those words and believed them. Even as the earlier novel marches ever to that ca-

dence of despair, the later one has for its great chorus,—His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Thus is measured the distance Thackeray has traversed morally since the end of his first manner. He summed it up, himself, though with no intention to do so, when he wrote about that same time: "So the father of all sends illness, death, care, grief, out of which come love, steadfastness, consolation, nor could these things have been if men had not been made mortal, and even erring and sinful and wayward. Suppose Eve had not eaten of that apple, and her children and their papa had gone on living forever quite happy in a smiling paradisaical nudity, it wouldn't have been half the world it is."

Thackeray returned North leaving his daughters with their grandparents at Paris and went on alone to London. He gave up the house in Young Street where so much of his work had been done and removed to 36 Onslow Square. In April, 1854, he wrote that he was well pleased with the new house; he described himself "poking about for furniture, . . . leave home at eleven every day and don't come back till midnight. I had a famous passage and a good dinner and sleep at Folkstone, dined at the Shakespeare dinner

here on Saturday, and am very glad I came, if only that Dickens, who was in the chair, made a complimentary speech, and though I don't care for the compliments, I do for the good will and peace among men.

"I have been to call on no one, but dining with old cronies, companion bachelors. . . ."

The house in Onslow Square was Thackeray's home for the next seven years and in it was written the latter parts of *The Newcomes*, the *Georges*, *The Virginians*, part of *Philip* and many of the *Roundabout Papers*. "The result of my father's furnishing," says Mrs. Ritchie, "was a pleasant bowery sort of home with green curtains and carpets looking out upon the elm trees of Onslow Square."

One of the famous anecdotes of Thackeray, one of those which really gave us a glimpse into his mind, belongs to 1854. A young lady who met him at Coventry, whither he had gone to lecture on "Charity and Humour," tells the story thus:

"He was the Bray's guest and would you believe it, they asked me, and me only, to tea, to be smuggled in as one of themselves with no introduction . . . he usually goes to an inn, hating to be made a lion of, but the Lewes's assured him that the Brays' would not

lionise him, and so he accepted the invitation. . . . I met Miss Hennell in the garden, who talked in an undertone as if fearful of disturbing the lion, who was then in his room writing the coming number of *The Newcomes*, and then went into the house anxiously awaiting his appearance. . . .

"At last he came, very quietly, but such a presence! We had to look up a long way, he was so tall. . . . He talked in a pleasant, friendly way. The coming number of *The Newcomes* was of course in all our minds. Miss Hennell, as our spokeswoman, said, 'Mr. Thackeray, we want you to let Clive marry Ethel. Do let them be happy.' He was surprised at our interest in his characters. 'What a fuss you make about my yellow books, here in the country. In town, no one cares for them. They haven't the time. The characters once created *lead me* and I follow where they direct. I cannot tell the events that wait on Ethel and Clive. . . .'

"I was told that next morning when they asked him whether he had a good night he answered, 'How could I with Colonel Newcome making a fool of himself as he has done.' "

The last line of *The Newcomes* was written



at Paris "one hot summer's day in the Rue Godot de Mauroy, in a big shady room looking toward the street." It was Thackeray's custom, at this time, though he dictated much, to set down the supreme passages with his own hand. "I remember writing the last chapter of *The Newcomes*," says Mrs. Ritchie, "to my father's dictation. I wrote on as he dictated more and more slowly until he stopped short altogether, in the account of Colonel Newcome's last illness, when he said that he must now take the pen into his own hand, and sent me away."

Prophecy is a dangerous business, but I would risk a good deal that the novel which was finished that "hot summer's day," in the year 1855, will, as time goes on, be left without a rival save *Esmond* alone for the first place in our prose fiction. The handling is not quite so brilliant as in its wonderful predecessor; there is too much digression; the style has not the early morning quality of the first manner; but, on the other hand, all the vices of Thackeray's earlier thinking have disappeared; and the book has this advantage over *Esmond* that it is positive, where the other was negative; it builds upon the ground which *Esmond* has cleared; as to details, the

style is pliant and noble, the portraits masterly, the tone, though grave, both hopeful and courageous. When all else has been said there remains to clinch the matter the constant presence of faith, of the genuine belief that—

“God’s in his heaven,  
All’s right with the world.”

To reckon up what had happened in Thackeray’s inner life, to appreciate his transformation, we should contrast *The Newcomes* with *Vanity Fair*. The career of the heroine alone contains the whole story of the enormous difference between the moods that lie behind the two books. Remembering that in *Vanity Fair* sorrow does not work salvation, we are almost startled to see how confident, in the later work, is the belief that “the Father of all sends illness, death, care, grief, out of which come love, steadfastness, consolation.” And all this, as I say, is summed up in the career of Ethel Newcome.

We meet her first as a brilliant, lovely, imperious child. She blossoms into a superb young beauty. We can all see that at heart she is in love with her cousin Clive Newcome, who is always in love with her, but Miss Ethel, through her mother, is of the world

worldly, while her father, Sir Brian, is but newly established there and his brother, the now so famous old Colonel Newcome, Clive's father, is hardly of the world at all. Ethel's brother Barnes is a pushing, unscrupulous snob; her mother a nonentity; her grandmother Lady Kew, now as famous in her way as the Colonel, is the real head of the house. A match between Ethel and her cousin the Earl of Kew is the goal of old Lady Kew's scheming and gets so near to success that the two become engaged. Poor Clive takes his defeat bravely in the midst of that Baden episode which makes upon the reader an effect quite as impressive and even more natural and convincing—if I may be allowed to say so—than the Brussels episode in *Vanity Fair*. The two love stories which run through the book—the story of Ethel and Clive and that of Clara Pulleyn and Jack Belsize—are entangled at Baden with the lesser affair of Ethel and Kew; with the odious scheming of Clara's impoverished but noble family who force her to marry Barnes Newcome; and with the wiles of the detestable Duchess d'Ivry who here pays a score against Kew. This is the episode of *The Congress of Baden*, told in seven incomparable chapters. It in-

cludes the breaking of Ethel's engagement due to revelations with regard to Kew's past life that are slipped into her knowledge through the craft of Madame d'Ivry.

Having broken with Kew, whom she knew all along she did not love, Ethel flings herself into gaiety and now Thackeray gives us the real thing in the way of a splendid flirt. She is thus described by Pendennis, who purports to be the author of the book. "I must tell you that this arch young creature had formed the object of my observation for some months past, and that I watched her as I have watched a beautiful panther at the Zoölogical Gardens, so bright of eye, so sleek of coat, so slim in form, so swift and agile in her spring.

"A more brilliant coquette than Miss Newcome, in her second season, these eyes have never looked upon, that is the truth. In her first year, being engaged to Lord Kew, she was perhaps a little more reserved and quiet. Besides, her mother went out with her that first season, to whom Miss Newcome except for a little occasional flightiness, was invariably obedient and ready to come to call. But when Lady Kew appeared as her duenna, the girl's delight seemed to be to plague the old lady, and she would dance with the very



youngest sons merely to put grandmamma in a passion. In this way, poor young Clubley . . . actually thought that Ethel was in love with him. . . . Young Tandy, of the Temple, Lord Skibbereen's younger son, who sat in the House for some time on the Irish Catholic side, . . . would entertain me with his admiration and passion for her.

"'If you have such a passion for her, why not propose?' it was asked of Mr. Tandy.

"'Propose! Propose to a Russian arch-duchess,' cries young Tandy. 'She's beautiful, she's delightful, she's witty. I have never seen anything like her eyes; they send me wild—wild,' says Tandy (slapping his waistcoat under Temple Bar)—'but a more audacious little flirt never existed since the days of Cleopatra.'"

To this girl Clive returns from Rome,—where he and J. J. are still trying to be painters,—the moment he hears she has broken her engagement. And now ensues a long period in which, as it seems to me, there is a distinct reminiscence of Beatrix and Henry Esmond. Clive is not near so bad as the melancholy Colonel, but just the same he is not quite right. To his great hurt a piece of Esmond has got dissolved in him and therefore

Clive Newcome must suffer long before he comes to his own. Be this as it may, however, he fails with Ethel though her tenderness for him is plain to the reader if not to the young people themselves and Ethel, who a year before flung over Kew because of his morals, engages herself to the utterly worthless, but enormously rich, young Marquis of Farintosh.

At the opening of Chapter LIII we are reminded of an unhappy love affair in the youth of Clive's father. "If my gentle reader has had sentimental disappointments, he or she is aware that the friends who have given him most sympathy under these calamities have been persons who have had dismal histories of their own at some time of their lives and I conclude Colonel Newcome in his early days must have suffered very cruelly in that affair of which we have a slight cognisance, or he would not have felt so very much anxiety about Clive's condition." This is by way of prelude to a furious quarrel between the Colonel and his nephew Barnes, who has kept him in the dark about Ethel's movements while the old man has endeavoured to compass the financial side of an alliance with Miss Newcome. By this quarrel, the two branches of the family

are separated and now the weakness in Clive comes out. His poor dear father—of whom Robert Louis Stevenson said that if the whole race of gentlemen should disappear, the type could be restored from this one figure—though a beautiful character has a vein of weakness which has descended to his son. The Colonel's one love affair was not with Clive's mother, who, if truth be told, was not a pleasant person and married that gentle soldier, in his disconsolate early days, after the failure of his real love, chiefly by virtue of being his superior in will power. In Chapter LVI, we see the pitiful side of poor Clive: we see, too, how artfully the dreadful Mrs. Mackenzie is laying siege to him in his misery for her little fool of a Rosy; we wonder whether Clive, like his father, like Henry Esmond, will make one of those marriages of consolation which are so likely before they are done to spell ruin.

Another marriage has meantime gone wrong. Clara Pulleyn has found Barnes unendurable and has run off with her old love who is now Lord Highgate. This event brings Ethel to her senses. Her own marriage with the Marquis would have been of the same nature as Clara's with Barnes and now the

horror of such marriage falls upon her. She breaks off her engagement, withdraws from society, and spends her time in the country taking care of her younger brothers and sisters and Barnes' neglected children. The two short Chapters LX and LXI contain a second general crisis. Laura Pendennis here attempts to bring Clive back—even as he came of his own accord after the break with Kew—and not only Laura but every reader of the book can see that Ethel has found her heart at last and this is Clive's day. But, alas! the weak strain in the Newcomes, father and son—the Esmond strain—has borne fruit and they must pay for it. Laura does not hear of Clive's fatal error directly but through a letter from his father to an old dependent with whom Laura and Ethel—who by now are great friends—have an interview. Ethel's interest in this old servant of her uncle's is made pointedly suggestive. On that day old Mrs. Mason must produce the letter she has just received from her dear Colonel and in this letter is the news of Clive's marriage with Rosy Mackenzie.

“Keziah must have thought there was something between Clive and my wife, for when Laura had read the letter she laid it down



upon the table and sitting down by it, and hiding her face in her hands, burst into tears.

"Ethel looked steadily at the two pictures of Clive and his father. Then she put her hand on her friend's shoulder. 'Come, my dear,' said she, 'it is growing late and I must go back to my children.' And she saluted Mrs. Mason and her maid in a very stately manner and left them, leading my wife away, who was still exceedingly overcome."

There ensues a period of Ethel's life in which she gives herself up to the service of others. Not in her is any trace of sentimentalism, of any luxuriating in her sorrows. This strong spirit could go wrong deliberately as when she engaged herself to Farintosh, knowing what she was doing—as Beatrix did with Hamilton—but for her the brooding self-absorption of Esmond, or Clive's surrender to the wiles of a consoler, are impossible. In the best vein of the third manner is that Chapter LXII in which the story pauses during a grand chorus upon the situation of all the persons. Here is the account of Ethel. "Her charities increased daily with her means of knowing the people round about her. She gave much time to them and thought; visited from house to house without ostentation: was awe-stricken

by that spectacle of the poverty, which we have with us always, of which the sight rebukes our selfish griefs into silence, the thought compels us to charity, humility and devotion. . . . Death, never dying out; hunger always crying and children born to it day after day,—our young London lady, flying from the splendours and follies in which her life had been passed, found herself in the presence of these: thread-  
 ing darkling alleys which swarmed with wretched life; sitting by naked beds, whither by God's blessing she was sometimes enabled to carry a little comfort and consolation and whence she came heart-stricken by the overpowering misery, or touched by the patient resignation of the new friends to whom fate had directed her. And here she met the priest upon his shrift, the homely missionary bearing his words of consolation, the quiet curate pacing his round, and was known to all these, and was enabled now and again to help their people in trouble. 'Oh! what good there is in this woman!' my wife would say to me as she laid one of Miss Ethel's letters aside: 'who would have thought this was the girl of your glaring London ballroom? If she has had grief to bear, how it has chastened and improved her!'

The closing quarter of the book is full of utter sadness but also of the tenderest faith and pity. The miserable married life of Clive forms a verdict on the marriage of consolation—which, when we analyse it, is as selfish in its way as the marriage of convenience. Clive committed one of these great errors; Barnes the other. With equal hand Thackeray weighs them both and finds them wanting. And all through this dark part of the story Ethel is the ministering angel. There is no scene in Thackeray at once so unhappy and so tender as the reconciliation of Ethel and her uncle, at Clive's house, shortly before Rosy's death. Of the death of Colonel Newcome all the world knows.

Again let us turn back to *Vanity Fair* and listen to that tone of hopelessness as the story dies away and we see Dobbin "seizing up his little Janey, of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world—fonder even than of his *History of the Punjaub*."

"'Fonder than he is of me,' Emmy thinks with a sigh. But he never said a word to Amelia that was not kind and gentle, or thought of a want of hers that he did not try to gratify.

"Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is

happy in this world? which of us has his desire? or having it is satisfied?—Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets for the play is played out.”

From this beautiful but pernicious writing we return to the epilogue of *The Newcomes*, where in such a playful way Thackeray sets us at rest about the final happiness of Clive and Ethel and after pretending to be uncertain, concludes “my belief, then, is that in Fableland somewhere Ethel and Clive are living most comfortably together: that she is immensely fond of his little boy and a great deal happier now than they would have been had they married at first when they took a liking to each other as young people.”

Can this be the Thackeray of *Vanity Fair*? this man who has built up his stupendous novel on the theme expressed in those words of his own, “the Father of all sends illness, death, care and grief out of which come love, steadfastness, consolation.” Yes, the two are the same, or rather the one has died and has been resurrected into the other. In this fact is the greatness of Thackeray’s life as a man—that great life whose noble, later mood was summed up in the words of a prayer which he wrote and showed to a friend who has thus



preserved it, in part, from memory: "He prayed that he might never write a word inconsistent with the love of God or the love of man: that he might never propagate his own prejudices or pander to those of others: that he might always speak the truth with his pen, and that he might never be actuated by a love of greed. I particularly remember that the prayer wound up with the words: 'For the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.' "

## CHAPTER VIII

### FOLLOWING "THE NEWCOMES"

WHEREVER we place *The Newcomes* as art it was Thackeray's greatest success financially, and he appears to have derived from it no less than £4000. Though this was not a great sum in comparison with the sums paid to Dickens, it signifies an extended popular interest. Thackeray had captured his audience.

However, he did not allow himself to pause in his labours but prepared for another business venture in America. This time his stock in trade was the set of lectures on *The Four Georges*. A farewell dinner, with Dickens in the chair, was tendered him by sixty friends, October 11, 1855.

Of this second American sojourn there is one anecdote that must be told. At Philadelphia "owing to the lateness of the season," his lecture was a failure. The person financially responsible was a "sad, pale-faced young man," who lost money on the venture. Thackeray

pitied him to the extent of leaving behind sufficient funds to make good his losses.

This portion of Thackeray's life includes another curious attempt—the third and last—to digress from the plain course of his natural fitness. In 1857 he stood for Parliament, as a Liberal, at Oxford. As a political speaker he is said to have done fairly well—far better than one might expect of a man of his temperament—and the episode is further remembered for a bit of repartee. His opponent, Mr. (afterward Lord) Cardwell, meeting Thackeray one day, made the trite remark that he hoped the best man would win. "No," said Thackeray, "I hope not." The vote went against him, 1,085 to 1,018. He took the defeat gracefully and in a farewell speech declared that he would retire to his desk and "leave to Mr. Cardwell a business that I am sure he understands much better than I do."

He took himself at his word and in November, 1857, brought out the first number of *The Virginians*. The last number appeared in October, 1859. His health was not good and may account for the fact that *The Virginians* is not sustained. One episode—Harry Warrington at Tunbridge Wells—is done with his whole strength. None of the book, is poor.

Throughout it shows the sanity, the sweetness of his third manner which had flowered so splendidly in *The Newcomes*. Nevertheless, as a whole it reveals a distinct, but as events proved only a temporary, decline of power.

A detail of the same period, sadder than the lapse of power, was a quarrel with Edmund Yates, which widened into a quarrel with Dickens, of which scandal-mongers have made much. It was all about a silly article by Yates describing Thackeray who was so mortified that he appealed to the committee of the Garrick Club on the ground that Yates had made use of facts he could not have known except as a member of the club. Dickens attempted to mediate. He was not successful. Yates was forced to leave the club and an estrangement arose between Thackeray and Dickens which lasted several years. It terminated only a few days before Thackeray's death when they met on the steps of the Athenæum and spontaneously shook hands.

The events of Thackeray's life subsequent to the appearance of *The Newcomes* culminated in the establishment of the *Cornhill Magazine* with Thackeray as its editor. His reputation was by now so great that when it was known he would edit the new magazine, the report



made a literary sensation. The first number, January, 1860, sold a hundred thousand copies.

It is said that he intended to open the *Cornhill* with the first number of a great novel by himself but having allowed other matters to interfere he felt he could not get it in hand and therefore, at rather a late hour, called on Trollope to take his place. His own contribution for January, 1860, was the first number of *Lovel the Widower*, a slight performance which ran only six months.

However, Thackeray carried out his intention after all. In January, 1861, appeared the first number of *Philip* which ran until August, 1862. This book, now so strangely neglected, is one of his great productions. Many people have assumed that it must be poor for no reason, apparently, except that when Thackeray wrote it he was growing old. Such people forget that the *Roundabout Papers* written at this same time are perhaps the height of Thackeray as a stylist. How to account for the heresy that *Philip* is a feeble work—a “shadow” of the early books, Mr. Whibley calls it—is a problem. I can find no explanation but the conventional idea that a writer like a wave must rise to an apex and then decline and hence that his later work

must necessarily be poor. Sometimes this is true but not always. As to *Philip*, I maintain that it reaches the very highest pitch of comedy Thackeray ever attained. Philip's love affair at Paris, and the duel of the brandy bottles, transcends the affair of Pen and the Fotheringay by just the extent to which the wholesomeness of Thackeray's mood in 1861 exceeded that of 1849. In this comedy there is none of the underlying bitterness which, sooner or later, for every discerning reader, becomes visible through the shimmer of the first manner and turns its light into darkness. The comedy of *Philip* is pure wholesome laughter issuing from the conviction that God knows what he is about with his world, and therefore his creatures may be merry even in their misfortunes; that if they but keep their courage up all things will at last work together for good.

It is a fortunate coincidence that Thackeray's third manner, like his first, closes with a novel on youth. The careers of Arthur Pendennis and Philip Firmin are, so far as mere events go, wonderfully alike. Who knows the story of one, knows in the main the story of the other. And yet no books by the same hand were ever further apart. *Pen-*

*dennis* for all its external brilliancy is worm-eaten at the core. *Philip* is a ripe apple, beautiful without and sound within.

The remaining events of Thackeray's life may be briefly told. He was editor of the *Cornhill* until March, 1862, when he resigned. According to report he was not a successful editor. He appears to have lacked system in his work and also was too soft hearted with poor contributors who needed money. The hardship of editing, as he conceived it, was the necessity to reject the work of the unfortunate. In his essay, *Thorns in the Cushion* he makes a humorous confession of how hard he found the task. With the successful people of letters he had no compunctions. Both Trollope and Mrs. Browning received rejections at his hands because of their subject matter, Thackeray asserting that the contributions in question would offend the public.

In February, 1862, Thackeray moved into a house which he had built—2 Palace Green, Kensington—in the wall of which there is now a memorial tablet. At the house warming, on the twenty-fourth of the month, his attempt at a play, *The Wolves and The Lamb*, was acted by amateurs, Thackeray appearing at the end of the performance to say a "God bless you"

in pantomime. He lived in this house nearly two years. Though not rich he closed his life in prosperity and Sir Leslie Stephen says that his receipts from the *Cornhill* amounted to 4,000 pounds yearly. Trollope says: "A little before his death, Thackeray told me that he had succeeded in replacing the fortune which he had lost as a young man. He had, in fact, done better, for he left an income of seven hundred and fifty pounds behind him."

He was found dead in his bed on the morning of the day before Christmas, 1863. He had been ailing for some time and the night previous had gone to bed early saying he was not well. The immediate cause of death was an effusion into the brain. Thackeray was buried January 30, in the cemetery at Kensal Green. A bust of him, by Marochetti, was speedily set up in Westminster.



## CHAPTER IX

### THE FINAL TRIUMPH

ELEVATED as *The Newcomes* is in moral tone Thackeray went above it in the novel which he left unfinished—the splendid fragment of *Denis Duval*. In *The Newcomes*, though it is one of those few great works of art whose fundamental motive is the acquisition of faith, we are still aware of the struggle that has led up to the faith. The battle is over but the roar of it still rings in our ears, the horror of it still lives in our nerves. In *Denis Duval* the very memory of the battle has been put aside: we are set securely upon a pinnacle whence we view the entire field of Life and behold all the parts of it related in a single design, the meaning of which is that His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

This intention to insist upon the final rightness of Life affects the method of telling the story. Like *Esmond* it is an autobiography but unlike *Esmond* it assures us at the start

that however dark may be the shadows through which if we follow it we must journey, the end of all will be happiness. Admiral Duval, sitting down to the composition of his memoirs, reveals himself as a serene, humorous old gentleman who can look upon his troubled past with a contented smile. Mentioning little Agnes, whom he knew as a child, he adds:

“And who, pray, was Agnes? To-day her name is Agnes Duval and she sits at her work-table hard by. The lot of my life has been changed by knowing her. To win such a prize in life’s lottery is given but to very few. What I have done (of any worth) has been done in trying to deserve her.” The admiral is a risen man sprung from a plain stock and this gives point to his next sentence: “I might have remained, but for her, in my humble native lot, to be neither honest nor happy, but that my good angel yonder succoured me. All I have I owe to her; but I pay with all I have, and what creature can do more?”

These sentences close the first chapter and form the keynote of the book. The ideas contained in them are the chorus to which the whole event moves. Thackeray is now secure in his faith that Life is right at bottom; that

no good is ever lost out of life but somewhere in some way bears fruit; that Love is the supreme fact, and the secret of Love is not to get but to give. Fifteen years before, when Thackeray drew Dobbin and Amelia, he had not learned that lesson. In those days of his bitterness he could say that Dobbin should get Amelia and find when he had got her that she was not worth having. At the back of his mind was still the unconverted pagan conception of Love—that it is a game played for a stake and that it is worth while or the reverse according as the stake won comes up to, or falls below, the expectation of the gamester. This conception of Love is one element in that natural man who must die to the spiritual man in order to get a true understanding of the words—"Greater love than this hath no man that he lay down his life for his friend."

Remembering Dobbin and Amelia married; remembering the fifteen years, the sorrow, the struggle, the victory, that separate *Vanity Fair* from *Denis Duval*; we understand why Thackeray slips into the second chapter, after the admiral has been commenting on Agnes' childhood, this paragraph:

"That daughter is sitting before me now—

with spectacles on nose too—very placidly spelling the Portsmouth paper where I hope she will soon read the promotion of Monsieur Scapegrace, her son. She has exchanged her noble name for mine which is only humble and honest. My dear! your eyes are not so bright as once I remember them, and the raven locks are streaked with silver. To shield thy head from dangers has been the blessed chance and duty of my life. When I turn towards her, and see her moored in our harbour of rest, after our life's checkered voyage, calm and happy, a sense of immense gratitude fills my being, and my heart says a hymn of praise."

When the melancholy Colonel Esmond sat down to the composition of his memoirs, he also, revealed his mood at the beginning. The contrast between the stout old admiral and the Knight of the Rueful Countenance is worth observing. "I have seen too much of success in life," says the Colonel, in his sour loftiness, "to take off my hat and huzza as it passes in its gilt coach . . . Is it the Lord Mayor going in state to mince pies and the Mansion House? Is it poor Jack of Newgate's procession, with the sheriff and javelin men conducting hi mon his last journey to Ty-



burn? I look into my heart and think I am as good as my Lord Mayor, and know I am as bad as Tyburn Jack. Give me a chain and a red gown and a pudding before me, and I could play the part of alderman very well, and sentence Jack after dinner. Starve me, keep me from books and honest people, educate me to love dice, gin and pleasure, and put me on Hounslow Heath with a purse before me and I will take it. And 'I shall be deservedly hanged,' say you, wishing to put an end to this prosing. I don't say no. I can't but accept the world as I find it, including a rope's end, as long as it is in the fashion."

We can imagine the satisfaction with which Esmond, the everlasting poser, who could never cease from acting a part before himself, penned those words. In his shallow mind they were a stately condescension to the frailties of mankind. And what an attitude he struck when he wrote them! Did he not show his superiority by deigning to include himself in this railing accusation which he masks with a smile? So he thinks; so he expects the world to think. And we must admit that it is a seductive philosophy,—this notion that we are all the victims of circumstances, that our conditions and not ourselves, must bear the

blame, as well as take the credit, both for our evil and our good. That philosophy is the key to Esmond's life. It was, also, to a great extent, the key to the century in which the author of *Esmond* lived, which he expressed more truly than did any of his rivals. What the creation of Hamlet was to the Renaissance—the supreme expression of its source of danger—that, allowing for the difference between Shakespeare and Thackeray, the creation of *Esmond* has been to our own time. We have seen how, in Thackeray, the expression of the danger was the means of deliverance from it; how he passed on, his work of destruction being accomplished, and reared anew the spiritual world. *The Newcomes*—fantastic as this assertion may appear to some—is the epic of the recovery by the modern world of the sense of faith. In *Denis Duval*, had Thackeray lived to finish it, we should have had a serene presentment of the new heaven and the new earth after all the turmoil of the night time had been lost in pure dawn.

In this connection especial significance attaches to the character of the clergyman, Dr. Bernard. That scene, in the fourth chapter of *Denis Duval* where the doctor refuses to take the hand of the Chevalier de le Motte, is

one of Thackeray's master-strokes. It should be set over against the first chapter of the second book of *Henry Esmond* as a contrast between conviction and sentimentality. The old clergyman, kind and fearless, but commanding, sees life clearly, and estimates people correctly, chiefly through expelling himself from his calculations. Consequently, he can act with a decisive firmness that hits the true solution of every case. Where it is right to be so, he is as gentle as a woman; and where it is not, he is, in every sense, a man.

To get the full measure of the contrast we must turn again to Esmond who, never being able to view a situation without himself at the centre of it, could not ever raise a pure question of right or wrong. Few things in any novelist are more subtle than the way in which Thackeray makes Esmond reveal and condemn himself in his meditations following Castlewood's duel. His patron, who has just told him the secret of his birth, lies dying. What shall Esmond do? Shall he accept the paper in which the poor Lord makes confession, or shall he destroy it and let Castlewood die happy thinking that his son shall succeed him? The situation, since Henry Esmond is under such deep obligation to Castlewood, is

indeed a hard one. What was right for Henry to do was a delicate question which Thackeray skilfully evades. He centres our attention, not on what Esmond did, but on the reasons for which he did it. Here again we have a case of that masterly blending of good and bad, courage and weakness, which is so characteristic of this subtlest of novelists when entirely in his own vein. Esmond's reasons are all so plausible that at first blush it is hard to find fault with any of them and not feel that we condemn ourselves. And yet, if we pause and observe him closely, we perceive, at the back of all his thoughts, this one question: *How shall I feel if I do this?* That is what brands Henry Esmond as the supreme sentimentalist. He acts, at bottom, not from a desire to do right, not from any passion of sacrifice, nor from a sense of obligation that will sternly pay its debt at whatever cost, but from a dread of his own sensibilities; he is afraid that if he does otherwise his sensibilities will come back upon him, he will be miserable. Of course, he does not admit this—nor any part of it—not even to himself. We see into his mind, but he cannot. Sentimentalism and truth exclude each other. So it happens that Henry instantly lards his motives



over with a great to-do about gratitude, sympathy, indifference to the world, the sense of honour. Again, we must remember that there is no question here of the right or wrong of his act. All that has been swallowed up in the revealed falseness of his motive.

In the fourth chapter of *Denis Duval* there was a chance for just this sort of a performance, but Dr. Bernard bore himself in precisely the opposite way. After reading that chapter—no matter whether we praise or condemn his action: let that point be waived as completely as in *Esmond*—We know that never in connection with any action did the Doctor ask himself: *how shall I feel if I do this?*

The man who was always asking himself that question thought of human life as the toy of a malign fate and laid every wrong upon circumstance. The man who never asked himself that question—or, at least, never allowed himself to be swayed by it—was once the means of saving Denis from a false accusation after which he revealed his point of view very simply. Here is the admiral's account:

“‘Come along with me, Denny,’ says the Doctor, taking me by the shoulder: and he led me away and we took a walk in the town to-

gether. And as we passed old Ypres Tower, which was built by King Stephen, they say, and was a fort in old days, but is used as the town prison now, 'Suppose you had been looking from behind those bars now, Denny, and awaiting your trial at assizes? Yours would not have been a pleasant plight,' Dr. Barnard said.

" 'But I was innocent, sir! You know I was!'

" 'Yes. Praise be where praise is due. But if you had not providentially been able to prove your innocence—if you and your friend Parrot had not happened to inspect your box, you would have been in yonder place. Hal! There is the bell ringing for afternoon service, which my good friend Dr. Wing keeps up. What say you? Shall we go and—and—offer up our thanks, Denny—for the—the immense peril from which—you have been—delivered?'

"I remember how my dear friend's voice trembled as he spoke, and two or three drops fell from his kind eyes on my hand, which he held. I followed him into the church. Indeed and indeed I was thankful for my deliverance from a great danger, and even more thankful to have the regard of a true gentle-

man, the wise and tender friend, who was there to guide, and cheer, and help me.

"As we read the last psalm appointed for that evening service, I remember how the good man bowing his own head, put his hand upon mine, and we recited together the psalm of thanks to the Highest, who had had respect unto the lowly, and who had stretched forth his hand upon the furiousness of my enemies, and whose right hand had saved me."

The whole of *Denis Duval* is in the tone of this passage. For pure and elevated thought; for serene faith; for the conviction that no good is ever lost; that life, at heart, is both right and beautiful: in all these respects this magnificent fragment towers above the novels of its time like the central peak of a great range. It is pleasant to know that Thackeray's greatest rival appreciated this wonderful fragment, that Dickens said of it: "In respect of earnest feeling, far-seeing purpose, character, incident, and a certain loving picturesqueness blending the whole, I believe *Denis Duval* to be much the best of his works."

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE MAIN EVENTS OF THACKERAY'S LIFE

- 1811, July 18, born at Calcutta.  
1817, sent to England.  
1822, entered Charterhouse.  
1828, left Charterhouse.  
1829, February, entered Cambridge.  
1830, left Cambridge.  
—, spent several months at Weimar.  
1831, entered the Middle Temple.  
1833, bought "The National Standard."  
1834, failure of the "Standard."  
—, settled at Paris to study art.  
1836, *Flore et Zephyr* appeared.  
—, August 20, married Isabella Gethin Creagh Shawe.  
—, Paris correspondent of "The Constitutional."  
1837, July, "The Constitutional" Failed.  
1838, *Yellow plush* appeared in "Fraser's Magazine."  
1839-40, *Catherine* ran in "Fraser's."  
1840, Mrs. Thackeray's insanity appeared.  
1841, *The Great Hoggarly Diamond*.  
1842, Thackeray began contributing to "Punch."  
1846, February 28, first of the *Snob Papers* in "Punch."  
1847, January, first number of *Vanity Fair*.  
—, October, last of the *Snob Papers*.  
1848, July, last number of *Vanity Fair*.  
—, November, first number of *Pendennis*.



- 1850, December, last number of *Pendennis*.  
1851, February 25, elected to the Athanæum Club.  
——, May 22, first of the original course of lectures on  
the *English Humorists*.  
——, July 3, last (sixth) lecture of the course.  
1852, *Esmond* published.  
——, Autumn, sailed for America.  
1853, Spring, returned from America.  
——, October, first number of *The Newcomes*.  
1855, August, last number of *The Newcomes*.  
——, October, sailed for America to deliver the lectures  
on *The Four Georges*.  
1856, April, returned from America.  
1857, July, defeated at Oxford, as Liberal candidate  
for Parliament.  
——, November, first number of *The Virginians*.  
1859, October, last number of *The Virginians*.  
1860, January, began editing the "Cornhill Magazine."  
——, ——, first number of *Lovel the Widower*, in the  
"Cornhill."  
——, first of the *Roundabout Papers*.  
——, June, last number of *Lovel the Widower*.  
1861, January, first number of *Philip* in the "Cornhill."  
1862, April, resigned his editorship.  
——, August, last number of *Philip*.  
1863, worked upon *Denis Duval*.  
——, November, last of the *Roundabout Papers*.  
——, December 24, died.



